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Word and Flesh:
Gender Utopias and Dystopias
in Three Canadian Science Fiction Novels

by
Patricia Ellen Mascaro

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1994

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Abstract

Many Canadian authors are turning to speculative fiction genres, instead of more realistic genres, to tell their tales. In the cases of William Gibson, Margaret Atwood, and Elisabeth Vonarburg, each author has used the speculative fiction genre of utopian science fiction, to satirically depict restrictive gender roles that exist in contemporary Euro-American society. In opposition to limited gender definitions, the authors also portray positive, subversive, and alternative gender roles. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* satirizes contemporary Euro-American gender roles by illustrating a future dystopia ruled by a repressive patriarchy, and the dismal consequences of limited gender roles for individuals. Vonarburg's *In The Mother's Land* presents an equally repressive matriarchy, in which the patriarchal attitudes depicted by Atwood are reversed, but nonetheless continue to flourish. In Vonarburg's *Maerlande*, women are politically powerful while men are marginalized. Vonarburg contrasts limited gender roles for each sex by creating androgynous characters who challenge *Maerlande's* system of gender definition. In contrast to these feudal hierarchies, Gibson portrays an extension of contemporary consumerism in a plutocracy that idealizes "masculinist" values, such as extreme competition, emotional isolation, and use of violence to attain goals. At the same time, Gibson's *Sprawl* society devalues characteristics associated with the feminine in Euro-American society, such as intimacy, co-operation, and nurturing. Although the same

"masculinist" values are advocated for all, how they are demonstrated is dependent on gender.

All three authors use landscape as a metaphor for gender. Consistent with landscape patterns identified by Jenny Wolmark in feminist utopian fiction, Atwood, Gibson, and Vonarburg depict "the centre," a imprisoning enclosure, "pockets of isolation," places of safety within the centre where individuals can resist the centre's gender mandates, and "margins," where individuals can create alternative gender roles.

Ultimately, Atwood, Vonarburg, and Gibson, show that storytelling is powerful tool in subverting traditional Euro-American gender roles. Their characters mirror the authors' subversive storytelling techniques to demonstrate an advocacy for varied gender roles. The authors manipulate traditional patriarchal heroic mythic patterns to include the "female hero," and use the image of the "cyborg" to illustrate the potential for numerous gender configurations.

Dedicated with much love and respect to my unconventional parents
Marge and Joe Mascaro.

Thanks for storybook hour, Art in the Park, sailor suits, braids,
and nicknames that need two hours to explain.

Also dedicated to the memory of the grandparents I knew
Elizabeth Haydock (Nana), John McCluney (Jack),
Joseph and Edna Mascaro (PomPom and BomMom),
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Introduction

"A surprising number of writers who call Canada home have infiltrated the front ranks [of speculative fiction]"¹ notes Dale Sproule. Although many critics have traditionally described Canadian literature as dealing with the "local", "regional", and "realistic,"² a recent edition of *Books in Canada* (March 1993) has devoted an entire issue to a popular new trend in Canadian authors' works-- writing in "speculative fiction" genres. There are precedents for this turn from the purely realistic in Canadian literature. Many critics have observed that Canadian authors often make use of "magic realism"³ (to borrow a term from visual arts). Stanley E. McMullin suggests that Canadian authors use magic realist techniques to "explore history"⁴ in order to answer the Canadian question articulated by Northope Frye, "Where is here?"⁵ Where magic realism, as a style, explores the past, speculative fiction genres explore alternate presents or possible

¹Dale Sproule, "Madly Into The Future," *Books in Canada* March 1993: 8.

²Dermot McCarthy, *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*, ed. Robert Lecker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 40.

³Geoff Hancock describes some characteristics of "magic realism": "A few features can be identified: exaggerated comic effects; hyperbole treated as fact; a labyrinthine awareness of other books; the use of fantasy to cast doubt on the nature of reality; an absurd re-creation of 'history'; a metafictional awareness of the process of fiction making; a reminder of the mysteriousness of the literary imagination at work; a collective sense of a folkloric past." *Magic Realism and Canadian literature: Essays and Stories*, ed. Peter Hinchcliffe and Ed Jewinski (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986) 36.

⁴Stanley E. McMullin, *Magic Realism and Canadian literature*, 21.

⁵Northope Frye, "Conclusion," *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klink et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965, rpt. 1973) 227.

futures. Where magic realism re-creates the past, speculative fiction changes the present or creates the future.

It is not simply a host of rebellious young authors such as William Gibson, Charles de Lint, Spider Robinson, Tanya Huff, and Elisabeth Vonarburg who are writing in these unorthodox genres; established Canadian authors such as Robertson Davies, Timothy Findley, and Margaret Atwood are also turning to these genres instead of more realistic writing. Even though the speculative fiction genres (science fiction, fantasy, and horror) are considered marginal in the traditional literary canon, this does not mean that the issues and themes in such fictions are not relevant to the present world-- on the contrary, writers of speculative fiction use the genres to explore questions that are important to contemporary society. In fact, a number of Canadian science fiction novels consider how ideas about gender roles might influence societies and individuals in the future, thereby commenting on contemporary society. The increasing trend towards writing in the speculative fiction genres, especially science fiction with a focus on gender issues, is significant. In particular, *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, *Neuromancer*, by William Gibson, and Elisabeth Vonarburg's *In The Mother's Land*, stand out as prime examples of gender exploration in Canadian science fiction; these three authors use the medium of science fiction, specifically the utopian form of science fiction, as a mirror to satirize rigid gender roles that exist in the present world, as well as to project the positive potential

that alternate visions of gender might offer.

Before proceeding with a discussion of the novels, it is useful to explain certain generic terminology, and to establish the frames of reference in which Atwood, Gibson, and Vonarburg are working. First, it is important to know how science fiction differs from other speculative fiction genres. In *Tesseract*, a collection of Canadian science fiction, Judith Merril presents an excellent definition of "science fiction":

So called "science fiction" is speculative or explorative literature (or sometimes visual art or music) dealing in some way with the idea of *change*--most often dealing with human responses to the altered, or shifting, environment of some alternative reality. Most often, simply, "future fiction."

The key words are *change*, *environment*, *alternative*.

If it does not deal with *change*, it is not science fiction. If the human conflict, problem, or experience is not integrally related to some external *environmental* stimulus (which might be simply the process of change) it is not science fiction. Unless the environment posited is not in some way other than the familiar assumptions of the here-and-now (or past) reality, then it is not science fiction.⁶

Although science fiction deals with future and change, it is often based on current societal or technological trends; it speculates on what the future may be like by extrapolating from what is happening in the present. In contrast to other the speculative fiction forms, such as fantasy and horror,⁷ science fiction gives readers a unique opportunity to see how authors envision the future, and what issues they feel are important

⁶ Judith Merril, ed., foreword, *Tesseract* (Toronto: Press Porcépic, 1985) 2.

⁷ Fantasy and Horror most often incorporate magic and the supernatural in their plots.

today in *shaping* that future.

Just as speculative fiction is composed of a number of different genres, so science fiction can be categorized into sub-genres, of which one of the most popular and longstanding is the "Utopian" novel. With its roots in Plato's *Republic*, and taking its name from Thomas More's 1516 work *Utopia* about an imaginary island that enjoyed a perfect political system and social structure, the Utopian novel can portray a range of possible realms. Carol Farley Kessler provides a constructive classification for novels that depict utopias:

. . . *Utopia* is the general term meaning "no-place, " or sometimes "good place"; *eutopia* specifies the dream or "good place" while *dystopia* indicates the nightmare or "bad place". . . . Besides *eutopia* or *dystopia*, there exists a third subtype, the satiric utopia or anti-utopia, wherein a society is turned upside down as a means of discrediting it. Utopian fiction in the twentieth century includes yet a fourth subtype, the ambiguous or critical utopia, which is neither good nor bad, but unfinished and still in the process of becoming. . . .⁸

Still, no matter what form of utopia a fictional society takes, "its imagined site always implicates the here and now of its production whether implicitly or explicitly."⁹ Thus, utopian fiction is, by its nature, didactic; the utopian author consciously presents new perspectives on the world, to either unveil subtle social dilemmas or injustices, comment about social conditions, and, perhaps, suggest solutions to problems in the

⁸Carol Farley Kessler, "Bibliography of Utopian Fiction by United States Women 1836-1988," *Utopian Studies* 1.1 (1990) 1.

⁹Frances Bartowski, "Introduction," *Feminist Utopias* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) 4.

hopes of inspiring readers to advocate social change.

Interestingly, one of the earliest Canadian science fiction novels, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* by James De Mille, is in the Utopian genre. David Ketterer calls it "one of the best such works of the 19th century,"¹⁰ with its satirical inversion of Euro-American values such as love and economic wealth. In the novel, four men on a yacht, caught in a calm, find a copper cylinder floating in the water. Retrieving the container, they discover the "strange manuscript" and proceed to take turns reading it aloud to relieve the boredom. The manuscript is written by Adam More, a sailor shipwrecked in the Antarctic, who survives to encounter a lost society, whose values seem to contradict all that European society holds dear; for example, the Kosekin strive for poverty rather than wealth, death rather than life, and unrequited love rather than happy marriage.¹¹ In De Mille's portrayal of the Kosekin country, gender roles are inverted; women have more power and wealth, but only because such things are abhorred by this society.¹² Yet De Mille plays upon this twist at the end of the novel, when Adam and Almah are named leaders of the Kosekin, sacrificing their poverty and chance at death in order to "endure all the evils of luxury, magnificence, and boundless wealth for the good of the

¹⁰David Ketterer, "A Historical Survey of Canadian Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 10 (1983) 87.

¹¹James De Mille, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1888, rpt. 1969) 98, 116.

¹²De Mille, 248.

Kosekin nation"¹³; Adam notes that "Almah. . . had quite adopted the Kosekin fashion, which makes women take the lead."¹⁴ Thus, in his conclusion to the novel, De Mille questions traditional gender roles by not returning his main characters to a world where traditional gender roles are in place.

Although roles based on gender are only part of De Mille's utopian satire on Euro-American values, other utopian writers, with feminist inclinations, have made gender the key issue in their novels. Part of the problem is in defining gender; some experts, such as Marlene Mackie, see gender as a social construction that is separate from biological sex,¹⁵ while others, most notably Judith Butler, suggest that it is impossible to disconnect gender from sex, and thus, what Butler calls for is the replacement of binary sexual categories with varied gender configurations.¹⁶ However, it is a rigid categorization of gender and the roles that accompany those definitions that most feminist utopian authors criticize. Most critics identify Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 novel *Herland* as a twentieth century precursor to the explosion of feminist utopian novels of the 1970's.¹⁷ In Gilman's novel, a group of three men discover a

¹³ De Mille, 249.

¹⁴ De Mille, 252.

¹⁵ Marlene Mackie, *Gender Relations in Canada, Further Explorations* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1991) 2.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, preface, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) x.

¹⁷ Bartowski, 23.

country composed exclusively of women; they marvel that these "amazons" do not conform to their preconceived notions of femininity, although motherhood, as the citizens of Herland define it, constitutes their highest calling.¹⁸ Other, more recent novelists have expanded on this all-female scenario, such as Monique Wittig in *Les Guérillères*, Joanna Russ in *The Female Man*, and Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines*. Often militant in their attitude advocating the exclusion of men so that women may achieve their full potential, these novels portray what Marlene Barr calls the eutopian "immortal feminist community."¹⁹ Other novelists portray non-gendered societies, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where her society of Gethenians have the potential to be both male and female, their sex being re-determined within each sexual cycle. On the other hand, some novels, such as Charnas's *Walk to the End of The World*, and Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, depict dystopias where people, usually women, are enslaved on the basis of gender. What all these fictions have in common is their recommendations for more varied conceptions of gender.

Responding to such works of utopian feminist fiction, Canadian authors Atwood, Gibson, and Vonarburg, add their voices to the call for more tolerance of multiple gender configurations. Atwood, an established and renowned Canadian novelist who often

¹⁸Bartowski, 29-31.

¹⁹Marlene Barr, *Alien To Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987) 15.

deals with feminist issues, has turned to the genre of science fiction. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood comments on the traditional segregation of gender roles according to one's sex, by presenting a futuristic, feudal, patriarchal society. Originally American, William Gibson has chosen Canada as his home, and science fiction as his preferred genre. Moreover, he is celebrated in the science fiction community for writing in the "cutting edge" sub-genre called "cyberpunk". In *Neuromancer*, Gibson, perhaps speculating on the possible evolution of gender roles, gives the readers an environment where the characters of both sexes adopt personality traits that seem to correspond with those traditionally associated with men. Finally, like Atwood, Québec writer Elisabeth Vonarburg also emphasizes gender issues. In her novel *In The Mother's Land* she creates a future world where matriarchy is the exclusive form of government, but individuals appear to strive for androgyny. Vonarburg's French-Canadian perspective provides a good contrast to both Atwood and Gibson. All three authors give us unique visions of gender in future societies that lend themselves to contrast and comparison.

In order to demonstrate the strengths and failings of our contemporary society's concept of gender, Gibson, Vonarburg, and Atwood create futuristic cultures where gender plays a crucial role in governmental and social power structures. In *Neuromancer*, *In the Mother's Land*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the invented societies are structured according to mandates based on gender stereotypes. The message in each of these societies is

that if individuals follow society's rules they will be happy. However, instead of giving everyone personal fulfilment, the sex-typing results in an imposed and limiting order that can only be described as a "dystopia". It is important to analyze how each of these invented societies uses gender stereotypes to validate its power structure, in order to see the impact it has on individuals, confining, limiting, and destroying potential. Only when this impact is understood, can we fully appreciate the messages that the three authors have for us as readers, for in these invented societies are darkly satirical mirrors that emphasize the contradictions in expectations of gender roles inherent in contemporary society. Yet, there is also hope as each of the authors, through images of landscape and subversive story-telling, suggest modes of gender non-conformity that allow for individual self-actualization; as individuals achieve this goal, society itself is altered, for the better, thus bringing society closer to attaining the eutopian dream.

Part I

Dystopic Gender Constructions in Future Societies

Chapter 1

In Thy Son's Command: *The Handmaid's Tale*

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the readers are thrust into the Republic of Gilead. In Gilead, rigid gender roles, and contradictions in those roles reflect many of the problems and attitudes that have existed historically in Euro-American society, and influence the present. Through the narrator's description, the readers learn that this near-future society is "based on a new right-wing, religious fundamentalism."²⁰ Gilead is not only religious, but feudal and militaristic. David Ketterer gives us a synopsis of how Gilead came into existence:

Atwood has imagined a late-20th-century future where a woman's ability to procreate is of paramount importance since disease and pollution have led to a catastrophic decline in the birthrate. Given this situation, the patriarchal Republic of Gilead, established as the result of a coup in New England, has thwarted what might seem a likely outcome: the increasing power of women with "viable ovaries."²¹

In fact, its patriarchal elements are exaggerated to the point of totalitarianism. Despite its claim to be the "good place," Gilead, as Atwood presents it, is clearly a dystopia.

Atwood's narrator demonstrates for us the rigidity of the Gileadian society. She quotes Aunt Lydia, a sort of thought policewoman, "The Republic of Gilead. . . knows no bounds" (23). Yet the society creates strict, and constricting, bounds for the

²⁰David Ketterer, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia," *Science Fiction Studies* 16 (1989): 210.

²¹Ketterer, "Contextual Dystopia," 209.

individuals within it. This restriction is most evident in the hierarchical structure of the culture. Each person is classified according to sex and rank. At the top of the hierarchy are the black-uniformed Commanders; they are the ones who control the government. Next are a class of soldiers called Angels; they fight the Gileadean holy wars, and are thought of as heroes. There is also a servant class of men, dressed in green, called Guardians. Finally, there are the Eyes, a spy network that enforces the laws of Gilead. Women fit into the hierarchy in relationship to the men who provide for them, since being female in Gileadean society excludes one from the right to own property, have a paying job, and bank accounts. Thus, to be a Commander's Wife is more prestigious and profitable than being a lowly "Econowife." Those women who are not married, or previous to Gilead's coup, lived according to values that contradicted Gilead's strict gender codes, are divided into groups according to their fertility: women with "viable ovaries" become Handmaids, vessels that will provide offspring for Commanders and their infertile Wives; sterile women who are not Wives become domestic servants called Marthas, indicated by their green uniforms, or Aunts, who "indoctrinate the handmaids with the aid of cattle prods and whistles" ²² ; finally, there are those who are unable to fit into these gender classifications, or rebel against them are named outcasts, banished Unwomen who are used as slave labor for the most miserable and dangerous tasks, or are

²²Ketterer, "Contextual Dystopia," 209-210.

given the unofficial option of prostitution to escape the certain death that being declared an Unwomen entails. Every aspect of an individual's life, especially a woman's life, is determined by the rank she, or he, is placed in.

Even the most fundamental symbol of being, a person's name, is regulated by the obdurate conventions of Gileadean society. For example, as a Handmaid, the narrator must relinquish her true name and adopt a variation of the Commander's name-- thus she is called "Offred", or "Of Fred". She belongs to Fred; this naming is an exaggeration of the Euro-American custom where a woman relinquishes her surname for her husband's upon marriage. However, some of the subtle consequences of this tradition are emphasized by the Handmaid's situation. Offred is not recognized as a person unto herself, but only as an extension of the male Commander. As a man, he "commands," as his title suggests, while Offred is expected to serve. In this way, Offred is representative of all the Handmaids in Gileadean society. Handmaids are not seen as complete individuals, and thus their choices and actions are extremely limited.

Even clothing is regimented. Individuals in Gileadean society must display their ranks through their attire. As a consequence of being a Handmaid, Offred is required to wear the red habit, which she describes early in the novel:

I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight in their red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around

my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines
us.²³

As Offred notes, the habits are "prescribed," and thus the Handmaids, like those in other rungs of the Gileadian hierarchy, have no choice in how they present themselves to the world by their mode of dress. Offred tells us she is "defined" by the menstrual blood red colour of the uniform. This association is indicative of the Handmaids' sole function as childbearers in Gileadian society.

As a symbol of patriarchal depersonalization of the individual, the habit is a familiar uniform most often associated with nuns of the Roman Catholic faith; it identifies them as individual women who have sacrificed their sexuality, demonstrating their religious faith and service to a spiritual power. Similarly, Offred must sacrifice her sexuality (how, when, and with whom she expresses it), but for a religious cause in which she does not believe. Atwood at once criticizes the institutions that force a woman to define faith by denying her sexuality, and emphasizes the importance of choice in how a woman uses her body. Thus, she directly juxtaposes nuns with Handmaids in a scene where Offred describes how young nuns are forced to convert to the conventions of Gilead:

. . . the young fertile ones they try and convert, and when they succeed we all come here to watch them go through the ceremony, renounce their celibacy, sacrifice it for the common good. They kneel and the Commander prays and there they take the red veil as all of us have done. (207)

²³ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: Seal, 1986) 8.

What Gilead takes from these nuns is the choice of how they serve society and a higher power, symbolized by the exchange of habits. Although Atwood criticizes the demand by patriarchy that the denial of female sexuality be a criterion in serving society, she also exalts a woman's right to choose what she expresses with her body. The traditional Euro-American dichotomy of virgin and whore, linked to the separation of sexual pleasure and biological function, is seen to be artificially constructed, creating roles that label rather than illuminate the characters of individual women. Thus, Atwood illustrates that a woman's choice to remain celibate is equal to the choice of being sexually active. Both choices are taken away from women who become Handmaids. In showing how the choices are stolen from women, Atwood emphasizes how important those choices are.

Hence, the Handmaids' uniforms are badges of their fertility, but that fertility is the only measure of value that Gileadian society gives to them. Offred says:

As we wait in our double line, the door opens and two more women come in, both in red dresses and white wings of the Handmaids. One of them is vastly pregnant; her belly under her loose garment swells triumphantly. There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done; we too can be saved. (25)

This attitude is again evident when the doctor offers to secretly impregnate Offred. She observes:

I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as sterile anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and

women who are barren, that's the law.
 . . . *Give me children , or else I die.* There's
 more than one meaning to that. (57)

The status of Handmaid depends solely on a woman's biological ability to conceive and bear children; it does not take into account any special intellectual or artistic ability a Handmaid might have. Moreover, a Handmaid is not expected to mother the child she bears; rather, she is simply a vessel to contain the Commander's seed, so that he and his more worthy Wife may raise the child. Thus, Atwood ironically juxtaposes the medieval doctrine of conception propounded by Gilead with the true scientific explanation, to demonstrate the hollowness of gender constructions in Gilead and, by extension, in her own society.

If a Handmaid does not conceive after three separate placements, she is declared an Unwoman, which is a death sentence, even if the reason for her "infertility" is the Commanders' sterility; thus, she takes the blame whether the fault is hers or not. On the other hand, if she does conceive, a Handmaid is not allowed to keep the child she bears anyway. She must give the child up to the Commander and Wife. The pain of being separated from a child is illustrated when Serena Joy gives Offred a picture of the daughter who was taken from her because she initially refused to embrace the teachings of Gilead. Offred thinks:

Is this her, is this what she's like? My treasure.
 So tall and changed. Smiling a little now, so
 soon, and in her white dress as if for an olden-days
 First Communion.

Time has not stood still. It has washed over me,
 washed me away, as if I'm nothing more than a woman of

sand, left by a careless child too near the water. I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there.

But she exists in her white dress. She grows and lives. Isn't that a good thing? A blessing?

Still, I can't bear it, to have been erased like that. (214)

Just as Offred has been removed from her daughter's life in the name of religion, so she will be separated from any other child she might bear for the Commander and his Wife. Whether a Handmaid is "fruitful" or not, she is still erased from the lives of people with whom she should have close bonds.

Marleen Barr's observation about "speculative fiction works by feminist writers" such as Joanna Russ, Joan D. Vinge, and Vonda McIntire is appropriate here as well: "Women are reproductive prisoners. . . They are birth machines whose individuality lacks significance."²⁴ Offred is little more than a baby-making machine. She is fed, clothed, and given a fairly comfortable shelter, but only because the mechanisms in her body, her female reproductive organs, are necessary to Gilead. As a Handmaid, a woman is denied the rewards of partnership, intimacy, parenthood, or any emotional attachment; she is denied the emotional life necessary to feel fully human. Her only other choice is to become an Unwoman, ensuring that she is denied physical comfort, and eventually physical life itself. In spite of Gilead's official dogmatic declarations that the role of Handmaid is a respected and fulfilling life role, it is clear

²⁴Marleen Barr, 129.

that it is not. Being a Handmaid is not a choice for self-actualization, but a choice for survival in the face of premature death.²⁵

The gender-based oppression of Gileadean society does not only target the women; the men are also hurt by the restrictions placed on them because of their gender. For example, the fighting force of "Angels" is made up of young, healthy men, but whether these men are conscripts or victims of propaganda, as are the Wives and Handmaids, is not clear. What is clear is that even though they are rewarded for their participation, they have little choice in how they are rewarded: the Angels must wed a Daughter, usually of a Commander, in an arranged marriage (205). The Angels have no choice regarding who, or *whether* they marry. Here, Atwood's criticism of the violence society encourages in young men is evident; Gilead law equates the ability to kill with marriage, thus, sexual intercourse, for marriage is one of the few situations where sex is socially sanctioned. Instead of making adulthood, a state where an individual makes life choices, a goal, Gilead makes "manhood" a goal, and defines it in terms of the amount of destruction and killing one does in war. So the restrictions on the Angels is evident-- they are forced to fight

²⁵Atwood sees "survival" as the main theme of Canadian Literature. *Survival* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1972) 32.

and forced to marry. As young men, these are the roles dictated for them by the laws of Gilead.

Of course, at least the Angels do get some reward for their service. As much cannot be said for those whose inability to conceive offspring, lack of Wife status, or unwillingness to do domestic or "educational" work, as the Marthas and Aunts do, transforms them into "Unwoman," by Gileadean standards; Unwomen are banished to "The Colonies," and certain death. Offred overhears a Martha named Cora say that she would not want to go to the Colonies, "With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all?" (10). To be an Unwoman is to be under a death sentence. Moira clarifies this fact for Offred later in the novel when she describes a movie about the colonies:

In the Colonies, they spend their time cleaning up. They're very clean minded these days. Sometimes it's just bodies, after a battle. The ones in the city ghettos are the worst, they're left around longer, they get rottener. This bunch doesn't like dead bodies lying around, they're afraid of a plague or something. So the women in the Colonies there do the burning. The other colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves. They don't bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to. Anyway they're mostly people they want to get rid of. . .

It's old women, I bet you've been wondering why you haven't seen too many of those around here anymore, and Handmaids who've screwed up their three chances, and incorrigibles like me. Discards all of us. They're sterile, of course. If they aren't that way to begin with, they are after they've been there a while. When they're unsure, they do a little operation on you, so there won't be any mistakes. (233)

Ultimately, even the Unwomen are delegated to chores, such as "cleaning", that Gileadean society feels is beneath men.

Certainly, their labour is far more horrifying than anything that the Marthas might encounter; however it is the same sort of domestic work on a different scale.

Atwood creates an ironic tableau, where the old adage "cleanliness is next to godliness" is given new meaning. The Unwomen are banished because they are "sterile," which, in addition to meaning "infertile" also means "aseptic." Thus, in contrast to the corrupt society of Gilead, the Unwomen are seen to be more virtuous than those who adopt Gilead's confining gender roles; Gilead treats those they label Unwomen as untouchables, when in fact many of these people are remaining true to their ideals and identities. The irony of the sterility in Gilead is exaggerated even more by the Angels holy wars, for they are meant to cleanse the world of infidels, but in reality they simply contribute to the ever increasing problem with pollution and radioactive contamination; it is the Unwomen who do the cleansing. Hence, it becomes clear that the rigidity and intolerance within Gilead that lead to the battles is a large part of the population growth problem; their closed-mindedness results in, and is reflected by, the infertility of Gilead's citizens. Atwood clearly demonstrates the hypocritical scapegoating of the Unwomen, which calls them unclean and unworthy to live in Gilead, for not conforming to the strict gender guidelines set up by the Commanders.

The Unwomen are unseen, unrecognized as they clean up the horrific messes left in the wake of the Angels' jihadic killings.

The rank names reveal the inequity; Male soldiers (for women in Gilead cannot be soldiers) kill for the holy cause, and are named "Angels"; they are superhuman, the best of men, worthy of honour and renown for their "glorious" deeds. In contrast, the Unwomen are seen as sub-human. They must deal with the practical and vile results of the illustrious holy war. The dangers the Angels face in battle makes them heroes; the dangers the Unwomen are forced to face in the aftermath is punishment for not conforming to Gilead's precepts of womanhood.

Ironically, not all of the people who might fit into the Unwomen category are destined for the Colonies. Those women who are young and attractive, but have failed or refused to be Handmaids, are given a choice between a slow and miserable death in the Colonies, or life as a prostitute in Jezebel's,²⁶ a brothel (233). Like the Unwomen, the prostitutes remain unseen by most, for their existence is a secret kept for the illicit pleasure of the Commanders. Although Gilead law forbids such places, the Commanders put themselves above the law. They can indulge in forbidden sexual activities, without the consequences of being discovered or accidentally fathering a child, for all of the women at Jezebels are sterile, by nature or by surgery (234). While the rest of the society, particularly women, must conform to narrow definitions of gender, the Commanders allow themselves

²⁶ The biblical reference to the wicked wife of King Ahab in 1 Kings is evident; the more popular meaning of the term, a "wicked or shameless woman" (Webster's Dictionary) is also appropriate. Atwood uses these commonly known associations to colour our perspective. Moira is shameless, but only because she has not truly done anything wrong; rather, Atwood shows her readers that Moira does her best to be true to herself.

sexual "variety." When the Commander comments that pre-Gilead women used a varied wardrobe to "trick men into thinking they were several different women," Offred notes "So now that we don't have different clothes . . . you merely have different women" (222). Offred's remark again draws notice to the artificial and hypocritical division the top ranks of Gilead make between procreation and pleasure; the Handmaids are supposed to be "chaste vessels" (228), while the Jezebels are thought to be corrupted beyond redemption, and only useful to provide provocative sexual services. Like the Handmaids, the Jezebels are not recognized, at least by those who know of their existence, as being individuals that are more complex than the narrow roles thrust upon them; and like the Handmaids, the Jezebels are judged only by how their bodies can fulfill a specific biological function.

Although Moira deeply regrets not being able to escape Gilead, she much prefers being a Jezebel to being a Handmaid; at least at Jezebel's, she points out to Offred, she can maintain her lesbian lifestyle when she is not on duty, as well as her smoking and drinking habits, which are denied to Handmaids. Thus, Atwood's portrayal of Gilead demonstrates that even conforming to prescribed gender roles is punishment. For example, Cora's remarks about the Colonies illustrate that the Marthas are forced into their domestic service much as the Handmaids are; for them it is simply a question of where they will perform their janitorial services, in a household or in the Colonies.

Similarly, the Aunts are forced to indoctrinate the Handmaids into their new role. Again, Gileadean culture is so narrow in its definition of roles that "education" is the only function they can see unmarried, post-menopausal women capable of carrying out. For example, during most of the novel, Aunt Lydia recites Gileadean propaganda; however, there is one moment when she breaks down, and the readers see the possibility that she is not such a willing participant in the hierarchy she propounds:

In the park, said Aunt Lydia, lying on blankets, men and women, together sometimes, and at that she began to cry, standing up there in front of us, in full view.

I'm doing my best, she said. I'm trying to give you the best chance you can have. . .

Don't think it's easy for me either, said Aunt Lydia. (52)

This one moment suggests that although Lydia has more power than the Handmaids, in fact, she has power over them, she is, conceivably, forced into the spinster/teacher/chaperon role as much as the Handmaids are forced into theirs of birth-vessel/mistress. Perhaps, Atwood hints, the Aunts are as much prisoners of the red centre as the Handmaids are.

The Aunts and Marthas are not the only servant ranks to be oppressed by gender-stereotyped duties. The Guardians are also oppressed because of mandates placed on them due to their sex. Like the women, they are unable to acknowledge their sexual drives, and must remain celibate until marriage. Thus, they are segregated from the women, for the most part, and friendships or sexual relationships are forbidden. Like the Marthas, they are forced to do menial tasks, but tasks deemed appropriate for men:

Behind the barrier, waiting for us at the narrow gateway, there are two men, in the green uniforms of the Guardians of the Faith. . . The Guardians aren't real soldiers. They're used for the routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young, apart from the ones that are Eyes incognito. (20)

But unlike the women, at least there is a small chance that the Guardians can move through the hierarchy. Offred comments: "They think. . . of doing their duty and of promotion to the Angels, and of being allowed possibly to marry, and then, if they are able to gain enough power and live to be old enough, of being allotted a Handmaid of their own" (22). Of course, promotion means following the gender mandates outlined by Gilead.

Therefore, if they are gay men, they must hide this fact or face execution as "gender traitors" (41). Moira tells us that the men who are not executed are sent to the Colonies as Unwomen (233). The Guardians, like everyone else in the Republic of Gilead, are forced to adopt a rigid way of acting that fits with the gender role mapped out for them by those in power.

Although the Wives seem to be a part of that advantaged group that is in power, they, too, are limited by their gender roles. The only pastimes allowed to them are knitting, gardening, and visiting with other Wives (12, 144). For many of them, like Serena Joy, the wife of Offred's Commander, this situation is a bitter irony. During the inception of the Gilead movement, Serena Joy made speeches "about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home". (43). Now, she, like the other Wives, must be content to reign over her household:

[Serena Joy] doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word. (44)

Although she is thought privileged, those privileges do not equal what Serena Joy and the Wives have lost.

Even their rule there is intruded upon by the Handmaids; the Wives must endure a violation of intimacy when they jointly have sex with the Commanders. Gilead forces the Wives, as well as the Handmaids, to participate in a *ménage à trois* sexual act called "the Ceremony," in the name of procreation. Certainly, the resentment of the Wives for the Handmaids is no surprise; the Gileadean law that Wives cannot kill a Handmaid on pain of death is indication enough that such murderous hostility exists (259). By being conspirators in their own loss of power, the Wives have robbed themselves of the faith and rapture that once inspired those like Serena Joy to follow evangelical callings. Where once Serena Joy was the "leading soprano" on the "Growing Souls Hour," now she must fight for the right for aggression:

She longed to slap my face. They can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands.

It's one of the things we fought for, said the Commander's Wife. . . . (16)

Ironically, now that the new order that Serena Joy helped to promote is in place, her role in that order is diminished to only caring for her house, and being able to slap another woman's face. The Wife's diminished role is obviously a warning from Atwood to those who, like Serena Joy, want to limit the choices of other women; Atwood cautions them to consider the

consequences of the things they advocate, or they may face the same fate as the Wives. Clearly, the Wives face some of the same discontent and despair felt by the Handmaids because of the strictures placed on them because of their sex.

Even those in charge, the Commanders who built the Gileadean power hierarchy, do not entirely benefit from the strict gender rules they impose. For example, they must live up to the unrealistic expectations to father children, in spite of their inability to do so. Not even legislation which seeks to suppress talk of male sterility, officially blaming women, can protect the Commanders "reputation"; in whispers and secret collusions the Wives, Marthas, Handmaids, and Doctors speak the truth about the Commanders' sterility, and conspire to conceive children in other ways. The Doctor's offer to impregnate Offred illustrates this tactic (p.57), and it becomes common knowledge that Janine-Ofwarren achieves her pregnancy this way (193). Even Serena Joy plots with Offred, without the Commander's knowledge, to achieve a pregnancy; they both agree that using a doctor is not safe:

"I was thinking of Nick [Guardian assigned to their household]" she says, and her voice is almost soft. "He's been with us a long time. He's loyal. I could fix it with him." (193)

Thus, the readers see the Commanders' imposed rule backfiring on them. The grossly unfair laws of the Commanders' creation sacrifice innocent women to save men's reputations; however, it is clear that the Commanders' reputations are more severely damaged, for pregnancy does not mean that he was able to produce offspring, but, as all the other ranks know, that the people

closest to him betrayed him. Beneath the surface, the system is driven by hypocrisy and duplicity.

In addition to creating an environment that necessitates such betrayal, the Commanders, by seizing power through tyranny, unknowingly sacrifice emotional intimacy with others. The Commander obviously misses something during the Ceremony, as all three participants do. Offred comments on this emptiness:

It's as if he's somewhere else, waiting for himself to come, drumming his fingernails on the table while he waits. There's an impatience in his rhythm now. But isn't this everyone's wet dream, two women at once? They used to say that. Exciting, they used to say.

What's going on in this room, under Serena Joy's canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those notions we used to titillate ourselves with. . . .

This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty. (88-89)

The Commander has again fallen victim to the definitions of sexuality that he has advocated for his society. If pleasure and procreation are marked as separate and mutually exclusive aspects of sexuality, as they are in Gilead, then emotionally void relationships, and the classification of people, especially women, into polar categories such as "virgin" or "whore," are the result, according to Atwood.

That the Commander finds such an impersonal relationship with Offred unfulfilling becomes clear in his later actions to promote a sort of intimacy. In being unable, or more likely, refusing to see, that the emotional connection he yearns for cannot happen in a society where the monopoly on power belongs to a select few, the Commander tries to use his power to bribe an

emotional tie from Offred. Secret scrabble games (131, 172), old, and now, forbidden magazines (147), the trip to Jezebel's, a secret brothel (215-239), and the promise of small luxuries like hand lotion (148), are all ways that the Commander uses his power to try to "win" Offred's affection. Offred says,

The first time, I was confused. His needs were obscure to me, and what I could perceive of them seemed to me ridiculous, laughable, like a fetish for lace-up shoes.

. . . To be asked to play Scrabble, instead, as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation too in its own way. As a request it was opaque. (145)

However, this is the Commander's way of trying to reach out to someone in the loneliness of Gilead. As Offred notes, "I don't love the Commander or anything like it, but he's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow"(153). He uses his power in order to fill the emptiness that the Republic regimented gender roles have created. Ironically, the one thing that the Commander seems to be using his power for is to make the type of connections with other women that Gileadean law, the law the Commander has helped to create, forbids. It seems that even the Commanders are hurt by the rigid gender rules of Gilead.

However, the Commander appears willing to accept the consequences of such rules, as long as he is assured his commanding place in the top ranks of Gilead's hierarchy. For the sake of power, the Commander gladly denies varied and authentic roles, and loving relationships to others and himself, as long as he has access to illicit pleasures and emotional substitutes unavailable to those in the lower hierarchical ranks. Similarly,

Serena Joy, is willing to sacrifice the personal fulfillment blocked by Gilead's strict gender roles, in order to receive the "rewards" of a high rank: access to blackmarket commodities, and a sense of power over others. Even Offred internalizes, to some extent, Gilead's rigid gender roles; she wants to give birth, even if she must give the child up, to maintain her social rank and the level of power she has now. Almost everyone in Gilead, in implementing or subscribing to policies that segregate and unequalize the sexes, are placing themselves in a type of prison, along with the rest of the population, even as they seek to assure their own power.

Gilead society perpetuates such gender prisons by reinforcing the segregation of the sexes and differentiation of sex roles through social rituals. The Birth Day is one such occasion; when a Handmaid gives birth, the neighbourhood Handmaids are called to be in attendance. Offred tells us, "On this day we can do anything we want. . . within limits" (105). Thus, the Republic rewards all Handmaids for each birth. The Prayvaganzas are another method used by the Gilead Republic to perpetuate the strict gender roles. Offred says: "Women's Prayvaganzas are for group weddings like this, usually. The mens's are for military victories. These are the things we are supposed to rejoice in most, respectively" (206). The rituals reward each gender group with a change in routine, for conforming to the roles given to them by the Gileadean Republic.

However, these tactics are not enough to promote such rigid

gender roles. The Commanders also use spies called Eyes. These men are secretly placed among the people of Gilead, often disguised as Guardians (20); everyone knows that the Eyes exist, but cannot readily identify who might be an Eye, and thus must suspect everyone else. Each person, therefore, feels that he or she must act according to the gender role mapped out for each one, or risk facing death. The Salvaging, a ceremony of execution, perhaps a play on the word "savaging," as the vicious "Particicution" of the accused rapist illustrates (261-263), ensures that everyone sees the price of disobeying the laws of Gilead regarding gender. Atwood's use of the term, with its connotations of death squads in Central and South America, also demonstrates the political, rather than religious, agenda of the Commanders. "Unchastity" (259) is cause for a Handmaid to be executed. Fear of constant surveillance and death is the main reason that these people conform to the gender roles set out for them.

The Republic of Gilead is a dystopia in every way. The imposed order stifles each person's individuality. No one in the Republic is happy, despite rigid adherence to the gender roles. Thus, the readers see individuals breaking out of that order, often eventually choosing death over the rigid roles that Gilead sets out for them. Yet, Atwood believes that Gilead can be prevented from existing; like a modern prophet, she offers us a vision of the past and present:

. . . *The Handmaid's Tale* criticizes the history of the patriarchal oppression of women and its religious and

liberal justifications. But more immediately, this dystopia provides a warning about the possibilities for a resurgence of such oppression-- abetted at least tacitly by bourgeois liberalism--through the activities of the self-styled "moral majority" and Religious Right in the US.²⁷

The patriarchal past is reflected in Gilead's hierarchy, as are contemporary gender roles; these can quickly become regimented, as Offred's past is Atwood's present. Responding to the Reaganite "family values" promoted in the 1980's, Atwood is concerned about the consequences of attempting to recreate a nostalgic, and mostly imaginary, past where women were women and men were men. Facing the threat of hostility against feminism, Atwood warns readers of both sexes not to be smug about the seemingly wide variety of gender roles available now: the "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel, in which academics discuss trivialities about Offred's secret voice-diary, reflects "the 'we've-already-won-the-battles-over-sex-and-racism' mentality of many present-day professionals."²⁸ In Offred's complacency, taking the variety of choices she has had in the past for granted, is the danger that they may be lost. Those like Serena Joy and the Commander who impose regimented gender roles on others will not be exempt themselves. Everyone in such a society is eventually hurt by imposed life roles that do not take an individual's talents into account. Gilead is an

²⁷ Patrick D. Murphy, "Reducing the Dystopian Distance: Pseudo-Documentary Framing in Near Future Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 17 (1990): 31.

²⁸ Murphy, 35.

avoidable future, and Atwood maps the vigilance necessary to ensure that it is never realized.

Chapter 2

Patriarchy Replaced: Vonarburg's *In The Mother's Land*

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred remembers criticizing her friend Moira for thinking she could "create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave" (161). However, Atwood's novel seems often to point in this direction. In fact, a number of feminist speculative fiction writers have depicted Utopia in exactly these terms. Marleen Barr calls it the "immortal feminist community," where "individual heroes or sealed couples are replaced with groups [of women]" who share a sense of purpose and identity, and achieve growth through "mutual collaboration."²⁹ She notes that in these immortal feminist communities, men are totally absent, or excluded and, ultimately, killed, so that the community can continue its peaceful existence. Writers of such utopian novels feel that only in the absence of men can women be free from patriarchy.

There are a number of indications that Elisabeth Vonarburg's *In The Mother's Land* is a response to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as immortal feminist communities. In many ways, *The Land of the Mothers* (or as Brierly translates it "Maerlande") is very similar to the Republic of Gilead. Again, the readers find a future society that, because of environmental pollutants lowering the birth rate of healthy children, is extremely concerned with fertility and propagation. And again, a

²⁹Barr, 16.

hierarchical power structure, based on prescribed gender roles, is in place; however, Vonarburg's vision is of a strict matriarchy rather than a patriarchy. In Maerlande, women are the principal players in government, science, religion, schools, and even historical accounts. In fact, in the Maerlande dialect native to Lisbei, the novel's protagonist, the feminized form of nouns is used exclusively; for example, "children" is used as the translation of Vonarburg's original french "les enfants."³⁰ Males are the oppressed group, valued only for their ability to produce offspring. It seems to be the immortal feminist community in action. However, Vonarburg, illustrates that any society that demands its people abide by rigid gender roles is a dystopia, no matter which sex group is in charge.

It is clear that Vonarburg's matriarchy can be equated to Atwood's patriarchy in many respects. Both societies set up their class structure based on the ability to procreate healthy offspring. As in Gilead, the clothes that people wear mark their rank and fertility. The narrator, who, the readers discover at the end of the novel, is actually the mysterious Kelys, says:

The blue gardiana was called Antone and she was a Medicina. Twenty years old: she should have been a red, but as she'd never been able to make babies, she was a Blue. She was a "peregina," a Blue who went from Family to Family instead of staying at home. Lisbei was a green and a dottas. The mostas were green, too, but not dottas. It took Lisbie some time to grasp the distinction. Normal Blues were usually over thirty-five, and they couldn't make babies because they had no

³⁰ Elisabeth Vonarburg, *In The Mother's Land*, trans. Jane Brierley (New York: Bantam, 1992)
10. In the original french edition, *Chroniques du Pays des Mères: Roman* (Montreal: Editions Quebec/ Amerique) 20.

more seeds. Only Reds could be "mothers," babies-makers. They were also called "genitrixes." Words, categories, hierarchies-- the answers multiplied with dizzying speed on this side of the garderie wall. (40)

The colour code indicating fertility here is almost identical to that of Atwood's Gilead. There are, however, no Commanders in black; rather, each "Family" or city-state is ruled by a fertile woman called a "Capta"³¹ or "Mother" who inherits the position from her predecessor by virtue of a close blood-tie.

The "Captas," like all the rest of the fertile population, male and female, wear red, as Atwood's Handmaids do; like all the Reds, they lose certain freedoms because of their duties to procreate. The Capta is the only woman in the city to conceive children in the traditional manner; all the other Red women in each city achieve conception through artificial insemination. Thus, most sexual liaisons in Maerlande are not based on the need to produce children, but rather on friendship and companionship. Therefore, lesbian and homosexual relationships are the romantic norm; heterosexual relationships outside of ritual are usually not even considered, or are deemed distasteful. Only the Capta conceives children by having sexual intercourse with a man, which stands in contrast to the societal norm. In spite of her position of power, each Capta is required by tradition to participate in the ritualistic sexual coupling with a chosen male. The choice of male is based on family "Lines," and

³¹The word "Capta" suggests both the leadership of "Captain" and the imprisonment of "captive." Both connotations are appropriate for the paradoxical title of Capta, as will be shown.

individual stamina. This act is called "making Elli"³² or "The Dance." Although the Capta is required to do this at her most fertile times in private, "making Elli" is also a public ritual associated with a festival called "The Celebration."

The latter term is reminiscent of "The Ceremony" in Atwood's novel. The similarities between the two rituals are evident in the episode where Lisbei and Tula spy on Selva while she "makes Elli," in order to learn what awaits Lisbei as the future Capta:

In the foreground is Selva, turned slightly toward the door, eyes closed, face half-hidden by her dishevelled hair. Selva on all fours, supported by her elbows. And the Male. . . is he straddling her? No, he's on his knees behind her. He's gripping her shoulders, digging his fingers in, and shoving hard, again and again. . .

He begins to move faster and panting hard. And suddenly he falls on top of Selva with a kind of groan, a weird throaty cry. She doesn't move, and he slid off her, lying flat on his stomach beside her. . . After a while she rolls over and lies aslant the bed, not touching the Male. "Goodnight Aleki," she says, her voice clear and cold. The Male gets up. . . On the threshold he turns, his voice full of malicious triumph. "What one has to do to be the Mother!."

. . . After a long pause, she rises. There are dark marks on her shoulders, hips, and thighs. She takes the lamp and puts it on her dressing table, sits down, and picks up her tortoiseshell comb. Lisbei can see Selva's face perfectly, alight in the darker oval of the mirror. Staring into her own eyes in the glass, pulling the comb unflinchingly through a tangle in the red hair, the Mother is weeping. (108-109)

Clearly, the relationship between Selva and Aleki is an empty one. Selva, obviously, does not derive any physical pleasure from the act; it is also evident from her remarks that Selva does

³²Elli is the name for the Creator of the Universe in this society. Certainly, it is evoked in a religious context, but it also is associated with a doctrine of universal love propounded by a Christ-like saviour of women named Garde, who is a historical and religious figure.

not want to develop the relationship on an emotional level. However, Selva's reaction to the Dance is more than apathy. Her tears prove that she is hurt by having to be so intimate with someone who does not care for her, and actually resents her. For Selva, The Dance and The Celebration are nothing to rejoice in.

Aleki also finds no joy in the situation, although he certainly uses the circumstances temporarily to gain a sense of power. In a community where men have no power, Aleki grasps at the one opportunity where he can impose his will on another. His uncaring, even brutal treatment of Selva is indicative of the way society has treated him as a member of an oppressed group, based on sex. Knowing that Selva is forced by tradition to have sexual relations with him, Aleki seems to make sure that he gets more out of it than Selva does; the episode is an individual taking rather than a mutual sharing. Ironically, Aleki uses Selva for his own need, a sexual satisfaction that uses her, but does not emotionally include her, just as Maerlande (represented by Selva in her role as Mother) uses Aleki for its needs (his sperm). Although Aleki may exhibit "malicious triumph," he does not feel the sex act with Selva is a celebration of life worthy of joy. As in *The Handmaid's Tale*, these characters must participate in a physically intimate act without emotional or psychological closeness. It is a violation by society, of both Selva and Aleki, to force them to sacrifice their bodies in this way for the sake of duty. The comparison to *The Handmaid's Tale* is clear. In both novels, the act of creating life, when it becomes

a duty for each sex, is reduced to a hollow action that isolates and emotionally deadens or warps the participants.

Only the Captas must participate in The Dance by having sex with a male. For the other red women, sexual pleasure is separated from procreation, a situation similar to Atwood's Gilead, except that pleasure is not eliminated or controlled by those in the top hierarchical ranks. The Dance at the Celebration, for them, is a festival where they ingest a hallucinogenic substance called "agvite" that makes one suggestible to ideas, and also has an aphrodisiac side-effect. Although the Celebration includes a public display of Mother and Male "Pairing,"³³ most of the population shares erotic pleasures with those of their own sex.³⁴ Lisbei contemplates her first experience at a Celebration:

What she guessed was that, under the influence of autosuggestion stimulated by the drug, the celebrantas shared in the encounter of Mother and Male, becoming Elli with them for an instant. . . and it all ended in an erotic orgy, just as Lisbei had supposed for years now, ever since finding naked sleepers scattered over the meadows and orchards of Bethely. And that was the dance. (280)

The Dance, therefore, has little to do with the impregnation process. The narrator tells us, "Anyway, dottas. . . learned at the time of their tattooing [a rite of passage] how humans made

³³It is important to note that this Pairing is not brutal as is the private episode between Selva and Aleki. Moreover, the sexual position used is one where the Mother and the Male move "toward one another in the first figure of the Pairing" (272); it is a sacred and loving act that inspires the "celebrantas" to love as well.

³⁴It should be noted that only greens are excluded from this festival, and that men are allowed to attend (although they are rare since Lisbei observes that historically, sterile men were sacrificed on such occasions).

their infants: with a syringe. And they all knew that love among humans had nothing to do with the production of children" (103). For the Reds of both sexes, the gulf between sexual pleasure and procreation is enormous. Even though this dichotomy allows for a certain amount of freedom in choosing a sexual partner, based on emotional ties rather than good genes, the Reds are still required by society to procreate as much and as long as they are physically able.

Therefore, Red women must endure pregnancies, even if they do not want them. Much of the ambivalence about "the Service," as dutiful procreation is called, felt by Red women is similar to that felt by the Handmaids. First, there is the anxiety about producing unhealthy offspring; like the Handmaids, the Red women must try at least three times for healthy pregnancies. Fraine, Lisbei's friend, reacts strongly about the Service, as the narrator describes:

. . . As Fraine remarked one day in one of her bitter outbursts characteristic since Ysande's death, it was the women who had to bear the children and sometimes die from them.

. . . Poor Fraine: she would have liked nothing better than to be declared a Blue right away, but tradition condemned her to one more try with a different Line. (298)

Increasing the population is so important in Maerlande that even after two stillbirths (like Fraine's), Red women must go through the pain of another attempt at pregnancy. And, assuming that the pregnancy goes to term, the Reds still risk death from complications in childbirth, as is Ysande's fate (262-264). It is true that the Service is deemed honourable by some, but those

feelings are not shared by all.

Although the philosophies in Maerlande about pregnancy demonstrate a wider range of ideas than Atwood's Gilead, some of the Families are just as rigid in defining women by their ability to become pregnant. This problem is illustrated in the story of Loi:

Once upon a time there was a Red who went into the Great Badlands. Nobody goes into the Great Badlands--you know that. But the young Red went because she was fed up with making babies that never came out of the garderie, babies that never even lived long enough to enter the garderie. She decided to go into the Great Badlands because she knew that when she returned to her Family, they would take out her seeds and sterilize her, to stop her from bringing Abominations into the world. She came home after two days in the Great Badlands. A day, a month, an hour would have been the same. They punished her and took away her seeds. She thought everything would be all right after that because she had no more seeds, seeds they should never have allowed her to keep on growing, even before her time in the Great Badlands, because they weren't any good even then. . . They weren't compatible with any male seed. After her punishment, she tried to live as before. But nobody wanted to speak to her because she'd been to the Great Badlands. And they wouldn't let her look after other people's mostas in the garderies, or the dottas. She was very unhappy. At last one night she threw herself from the highest roof in the Capterie. She died. (70)

The moderately progressive Family of Bethely, led by Selva, is shocked and outraged at the treatment of Selva's sister Loi in the Juddite Family of Cartano. There is a definite resemblance to the attitude of Gilead in Juddite Families. The shame felt by Loi at producing "Abominations" is similar to the fear and horror felt by the Handmaids about producing "Unbabies." There is also a variation on the banishment motif exhibited in *The Handmaid's Tale* by the Unwomen; here, Loi chooses contamination in "The

Badlands," much as some Unwomen go to The Colonies, to escape forced pregnancies. Moreover, the isolation that Loi feels because of persecution by the Juddites is similar to the isolation felt by many of the Handmaids, including Offred, and has the same results-- suicide, whether contemplated, attempted, or completed.

Since Loi rejected the Juddite mandate that the ability to bear children creates a woman's worth, she is punished, not by the hysterectomy, for that was her goal, but by ostracism and the refusal by others to acknowledge what else she might significantly contribute to society. As Selva says, "Loi would have been an excellent gardiana. She'd have been excellent at anything. And all they could make of her was a renegada" (71). Here women judge another woman's worth on the sole grounds of her contributions as a child-bearer; all else is secondary. If one, like Loi, rejects their criteria for womanhood, she is denied any other means of contributing to society.

Even though the Juddites are extreme, the same attitudes, in varying forms, exist in all parts of Maerlande . For example, even though in Bethely a woman is not expected to perpetually try to become pregnant if it is clear that she cannot, there is still a stigma attached to women who are infertile. This stigma is clear when Lisbei loses her position as "Mother-designate" when her sister Tula begins to menstruate before she does, and it looks as though Lisbei never will. When Selva tells Lisbei that she is required to participate in the "Games," an Olympic-like sports

event, Lisbei reacts vehemently: "A Blue!" Lisbei exploded at last. "A Blue, Blue, Blue! I'm a Blue, and I have no duties!" (129). Although the Bethely Family is not so cruel as the Juddites, Lisbei is still judged inadequate for leadership as Capta because she cannot fulfil the reproductive service to the community demanded of women because of their sex. The fact that the title "Capta" and "Mother" are interchangeable shows that the matriarchy of Maerlande equates female fertility with social prestige and political power. However, in whatever degree this attitude appears as official law, it is unfair to Reds like Loi and Lisbei, since it suggests that women can only become fully self-actualized in this one contribution to society, that is, the production of children.

If the gender expectations, based on the ability to produce offspring, are demanding for women in the Land of the Mothers, they are even more so for the men. Men are removed from the hub of society, occupied by females, in order to fulfil these expectations. These expectations are evident even in the treatment of young boys. The narrator describes how Rubio, Turri, and Garrec, the three boys in the West Garderie, are treated by the gardianas:

For one thing, the gardianas call them "boys" . . . "Boys," say the gardianas, and the trio lift their heads as one. They're always together, do everything together, and that's why they're almost never spoken to individually. Or maybe it's the other way round: because they're always called "boys" they have a rather hazy idea of their individual identities. . . The gardianas attitude is what sets the boys apart and, like the other mostas, [Lisbei] instinctively imitates the gardianas. Why would she realize it anyway? The

gardenias themselves are unaware of treating the boys differently and would probably be very surprised if you pointed it out. (5)

Even in childhood, the male mostas are separated from the female mostas by the attitude of their adult care-givers. Perhaps the expectations placed on them are better described in terms of inaction, rather than action: first, the boys are not expected to join in the female mostas in playing games, which prepares the girls to lead active lives; and second, since they are not recognized as individuals, they are not expected to achieve particularly special accomplishments. All males have only one task that can only be done when they are reds; therefore, until then, the males are not important to society.

The segregation of the males in Maerlande, particularly in Bethely, is intensified as the boys grow older. When they become old enough to leave the garderie, they do not join the female populated urban centre, but are sent away to surrounding farms. In Bethely, "all the boys went to Malverde Farm when they left the garderie" (101). This separation from mainstream society reflects the rigid role that Maerlande has defined for the males, the sole purpose of sending them away is to "train" them "for the Service" (101). Unlike the females, whose training encompasses more than the prime task of child-bearing, so that after their Service women can contribute to society in other ways, the Males are trained only for the Service. Hence, the Farms resemble the Red Centre of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Like the potential Handmaids, the Green males are trained exclusively to be

instruments of procreation:

To do their Service really well, especially if they were chosen to be the Mother's Male, they had to learn a few of the Family Languages: Iturri, Moski, Litale, or Franglei. Some Families also taught their Green boys the History of the Families in which they were to serve, the geography, the Cartas, and "their rules, traditions, customs, and other idiosyncracies not committed to writing. . . ." (101)

The males' education has nothing to do with what their own interests are, but rather how they might best serve as suppliers of genetic material, whether it be for the insemination process, or the Dance with the Mother.

As the narrator notes, "When Green boys become Red males, they went to do their Service in other Families with compatible genes. Two years per Family" (101). Again, like the Handmaids, they are passed from one owner to another, shared among those in power like rare commodities; as the Handmaids are walking birth vessels for Gilead, so the Red men are suppliers of sperm for Maerlande. It is unlikely that many of the men are able to form close relationships during their Service. For instance, the man chosen for the Mother of Bethely is isolated in the "West Tower," and, therefore, probably does not have contact with many people other than Selva; her reaction to Aleki shows that a close bond between Mother and Male is often very difficult to attain. Even if a male does make friends during his two years with a particular Family, those ties must be, at least temporarily, broken when he must leave for his next two years. Thus, if a male does make emotional connections with someone, pain is sure to follow with his forced departure.

Not surprisingly, this rigid gender role set out for them by Maerlande society creates in the Red males a great despair. Dougall, one of the individual males with whom Lisbei becomes acquainted, describes the predicament this role puts on Red men:

"What stops me from living?. . . What stops us from living? The Service, of course! Being a Red and not being chosen. Or being chosen and having to leave all the time. Becoming a Blue with nowhere to go. Being good for just one thing, and good for nothing afterward." (220)

Dougall's remarks illustrate how the strict role set out for Red males by society has trapped them in empty lives. Because society only expects and demands one thing from them, that is producing viable sperm, the Red males are de-humanized and enslaved by society. They cannot pursue other dreams, and, in fact, are not expected to want something more than simply being "cattle" (220).

This attitude is emphasized by the fact that, although men are wanted for their fertility, they are thought to be incapable of caring for the children they, in part, create. This is more hurtful than being not valued because of infertility, as is demonstrated in Lisbei's encounter with Toller, the mysterious Blue male from Angresea:

It took Lisbei a little while to realize she had misunderstood the Blue's sudden irritation. What hurt him wasn't his inability to produce more children: it was not *knowing* them! What an odd idea!. . . It had never occurred to her that men might want to know their children. "Their children." The very expression was bizarre, and yet the children were theirs, too, in a way. But to know them. . . the idea was well, a bit ridiculous, no? (289)

For Lisbei, since she comes from Bethely, it is unusual for even

a mother to know her child. Other Families that have opted to let mothers raise their own children still exclude fathers from that experience, and Families that use gardianas as care-givers deem men unsuitable for that task. The similarity to the Handmaid's experience is obvious; like the Handmaids, and many Red women in Maerlande, society is willing to force Red males to procreate, but the fertility that they are valued for does not provide them with any intrinsic rewards, especially the joy and the responsibility of child-rearing.

Like Loi, the adult males are excluded from most things the way they are from child-rearing. As has been mentioned, the Male education is geared only towards performing the Service; but even in the rare instances when a male, Red or Blue, is allowed to go to "Schole," or University, he is forbidden from taking the more complex courses. It is said of Dougall: "'Anyway, he can't study the subjects he really wants.' Men were never communicatas, of course" (220-221). Just as Offred and other women are denied careers in Gilead, so Dougall and the men in Maerlande are denied the right to enter certain studies because of their gender.

The discrimination against males is even more widespread than in the choice of learning experience and careers; even in the most simple settings, males in Maerlande confront discrimination. For example, when Lisbei's group of friends in Wardenberg are in one of their favourite meeting places, The Dancing Princess, Dougall becomes the object of unwarranted hostility from women at the next table; the women refuse to give

the group one of their extra chairs so that Dougall may sit down (296). It is clear that men are even excluded from social gathering places, by certain segments of Maerlande culture. The reasoning behind the segregation and exclusion of men from the main of Maerlande society is, perhaps, best seen in the exclusion of men from The Games. Many of the competitions in The Games are combative, and, as Lisbei says,

Tests of skill and accuracy such as archery or similar events showed only one thing: aptitude for the Patrol. And the Patrol was every woman's obligation, without exception. Each must do her stint of surveillance on the limits of various badlands. (344)

Of all career options, that of "Patrola" (guard or soldier) is most forbidden to males. Before Maerlande's existence, a patriarchy ruled by Chieftains exploited women in "The Harems." Violence toward women was rampant, until a rebellion by women overthrew that rule. Still, a fear exists among the women of Maerlande that men are a threat if they are not subjugated; there is an "the old Hive proverb" that "Men and arms go too well together" which is used often to prohibit men from competing in combative games (344). In this scenario, men are stigmatized by the actions of their ancestors, leading to discrimination, ostracism and oppression based on prejudice. The men are not given a chance as individuals, but are judged solely by their sex, given regimented and narrow roles to fulfil for society.

The injustice of this situation parallels the Handmaids'. In both cases, the sex group in power uses the authority of history, linked to religious writings, to justify their

subjugation of the other sex. In Gilead, the Bible as the Word of God is the basis for women's marginal place in society; as daughters of Eve, the original temptress and sinner, they must be led to virtue by male leaders (HT 207). Similarly, the teachings of Garde, a female Christ-like figure, are manipulated by some to justify the oppression of men as a natural and holy duty (345-346). As the readers can see, neither situation is just, since each denies individuals the freedom to choose how they use their bodies and what life goals they can pursue.

The oppression of Maerlande's men is evident even in the language of the land, where the use of the feminine singular personal pronoun, or feminine forms of words, are used to describe potentially non-gendered occupations or roles. For example, the suffix "a" is added to words like "patrolla," or "medicina," to indicate the female exclusivity in these high status occupations. Similarly, in the original French version, Vonarburg uses the female personal pronouns "elles" to mean the universal "they," as it applies to society, in general. Vonarburg uses the same strategy as *Les Guérillères* author, Monique Wittig. Wittig explains the importance of her use of this term, which also illuminates Vonarburg's purposes:

. . . there is a personal pronoun used very little in French which does not exist in English--the collective plural *elles* (*they* in English)--while *ils* (*they*) often stands for the general: *they say*, meaning *people say*. This general *ils* does not include *elles*, no more, I suspect, than *they* includes any *she* in its assumption. . . . Now in English the translator [of *Les Guérillères*], lacking the lexical equivalent for *elles*, found himself compelled to make a change, which for me destroys the effect of the attempt. When *elles* is

turned into *the women*, the process of universalization is destroyed. All of a sudden, *elles* stopped being *mankind*. When one says "the women," one connotes a number of individual women, thus transforming the point of view entirely, by particularizing what I intended as universal.³⁵

As in Wittig's novel, the characters in Vonarburg's *In The Mother's Land* assume a female subject in general discourses.

At once, Vonarburg's use of "elles" subtly criticizes two literary attitudes that attempt to universalize the subject of the text. First, Vonarburg reveals how the traditional use of "he" or "il" employed to mean "one" or "on" neglects to acknowledge female persons as part of the community, just as "elles" excludes men from Maerlande communities. However, Vonarburg also criticizes Wittig and other writers of immortal feminist utopian fiction for assuming a universality among women, or a single form of feminism.³⁶ Like the Canadian postmodern women writers that Linda Hutcheon discusses in *The Canadian Postmodern*, Vonarburg uses parody's "simultaneous use and abuse of conventions that have been deemed 'universal' works to reveal the hidden gender encoding."³⁷ In contrast to the immortal feminist communities discussed by Marleen Barr, where groups of

³⁵ Monique Wittig, "The Mark of Gender," *Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 69-70.

³⁶ Many critics have pointed out the importance of recognizing "feminisms," rather than a single, cohesive political movement composed of people whose only link to each other is their female gender. Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988) 107; Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women, Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) 165, 174.

³⁷ Linda Hutcheon, 110.

women replace individuals as heroes³⁸, Vonarburg's novel portrays a community composed of individuals with distinct identities. Although these individuals can empathize and work with others in their society, they do not blindly conform; in fact, an important element in their functioning within the community is their ability to voice dissent. Thus, the universal "elles" is shown to be as inadequate as the universal "he."

Interestingly, Vonarburg's reversal technique not only drives home the arguments and warnings of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also criticizes and expands on those arguments and warnings. Her portrayal of a matriarchy where men are marginalized illustrates the discrimination that women have historically experienced; the readers are meant to feel sympathy for individuals such as Dougall and Toller, and apply this sympathy to people within their own past and present, particularly women, who have experienced the same imposition of strict gender roles. However, instead of advocating a women-only society, Vonarburg warns us that simply reversing the situation is not helpful; in addition, she warns that patriarchy, with all its injustice, can lead to such a devastating reversal, unless people change their notions about sex determining an individual's life role(s). Vonarburg is perhaps commenting that women must also give up some of some notions based on past gender roles; the attitude that men should be excluded from the process of parenting, an attitude many men are confronting in the present,

³⁸Barr, 15.

is simply an acceptance of patriarchally defined roles that not only damages individuals, but all of society.

Vonarburg also comments on mainstream concepts of heterosexuality in her reversal of those "norms" in her novel, something which Atwood only alludes to, then passes over in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Again, Vonarburg illustrates the discrimination against a historically marginalized group, the gay and lesbian community, by depicting the same sort of discrimination against individuals who engage in heterosexual sexual relationships. Again, Vonarburg is advocating a societal change that accepts both types of sexuality as demonstrations of love. The relationships between Lisbei and Tula, and Lisbei and Toller are symbolically the same; they both involve a "sharing of the light," that indescribable empathic connection between the descendents of Kelys, and a sharing of parenthood, for Toller fathers Lisbei's child, while Tula adopts her. Clearly, Vonarburg advocates the recognition of both types of sexuality as rewarding to individuals, and valid for society, as long as it is an individual choice, and not an imposed duty of gender.

Finally, Vonarburg addresses those who would advocate the separatism of immortal feminist communities. Vonarburg shows that it is possible to achieve that shared identity and mutual growth, without sacrificing the individuality of character that occurs in the novels Barr examines.³⁹ Hence, in portraying a dystopia with certain utopian elements, Vonarburg not only

³⁹Barr, 15.

demonstrates the weaknesses that strict gender roles create in our society, she also suggests that there might exist an entirely new social model of gender for us to follow.

Chapter 3

Boys' Town: Gibson's Masculine World in *Neuromancer*

Unlike the relatively primitive societies portrayed by Atwood and Vonarburg, William Gibson gives his readers an extremely technologically advanced future where gender stereotypes help to shape his version of dystopia. In contrast to the governments created by the other two authors, Gibson's world in *Neuromancer* is controlled by neither a patriarchy nor a matriarchy; rather, Gibson portrays an extension of contemporary society's avid consumerism in a plutocracy⁴⁰ that idealizes masculinist values⁴¹. Despite the differences in his fictional hierarchy, Gibson's purpose is the same as the other authors', that is, to satirize contemporary values, including those that arbitrarily define gender roles, in order to promote societal

⁴⁰ As Miriyam Glazer puts it, "Driven by the energy of an all-consuming market economy, societies from Japan to the North American 'Sprawl' are controlled not by nationalistic governments but by rival multi-national corporations." "'What is Within Now Seen Without': Romanticism, Neuromanticism, and the Death of the Imagination in William Gibson's Fictive World," *Journal of Popular Culture* 23.3 (1989):157.

⁴¹ I have adopted the term "masculinist values" from Joan Gordon, below, to describe certain standards which, in contemporary society, are arbitrarily pressed on men, because of their gender. For example, John Remy observes how "the collective symbolic shedding of blood," as a reflection of the brother in arms bonds that occur in war, is often an element of membership in fratriarchies; "predicated on the institution known as the *men's hut*," this form of androcracy is characterized by a "rebellion against female values" and "a penchant for gratuitous violence." "Patriarchy and fratriarchy as forms of androcracy," *Men, Masculinities, and Social Theory*, ed. Jeff Hearn and David Morgan (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1990) 45,49. Another value contemporary society advocates for men is the inexpression of certain emotions, such as compassion, joy, and trust for other men in the face of fierce competition; this type of value for men leads to a feeling of emotional isolation and pressure to compete, according to the authors of "Men and Change, Reflections from a Men's group." Vic Blake, Andy Brown, Robin Fairbairns, Bill Shepard, David Spiegelhalter, Martin Steckelmacher, and Willie Sugg, "Men and Change, Reflections from a Men's Group," *Between Men and Women*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1992) 127.

change. Joan Gordon comments on the portrayal of such values in cyberpunk: "At first glance, [the subgenre of Cyberpunk, with *Neuromancer* as an example] seems to be overt masculinist science fiction-- men are men, waving guns and knives, competing like all getout and plugged up to the gills with pollutant technology."⁴² Hence the readers find a society that encourages the most aggressive and violent sorts of competition in every aspect of life: deadly violence is entertainment; emotional ties are devalued because they are not materially profitable; bodies become mere commodities. Moreover, these values are advocated for, and adopted by, both men and women, although gender generally determines how these values materialize into monetarily profitable deeds. Evident at every economic level of Gibson's future society, from the criminal underworld inhabited by the protagonist, Case, to the criminal upper crust of isolated, ruthless, and corrupt corporate leaders, is the need to compete, and win at any cost.

The excessive competitiveness, fuelled by the *laissez-faire* economy, is evident in Gibson's depiction of Chiba's Night City:

Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button. Stop hustling and you sank without a trace, but move a little too swiftly and you'd break the fragile surface tension of the black market; either way, you were gone, with nothing left of you but some vague memory in the mind of a fixture like Ratz [the bartender], though your heart and lungs or kidneys might survive in the service of some stranger with New Yen for the clinic

⁴²Joan Gordon, "Yin and Yang Duke It Out," *Storming the Reality Studio*, ed. Larry McCaffrey (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 196.

tanks. (7)

In Night City, as in the rest of Gibson's universe, there seems to be no mercy for those who fail; mercy has traditionally been thought of as a feminine virtue, and is devalued in Gibson's world. An individual has to be able to keep up with the race for sex, drugs, and power (all of which are bought rather than won), or die. People who cannot keep up become products; they are dehumanized, their bodies stripped for parts like stolen automobiles, and their organs sold to those with the funds to afford survival.

Often people sell *themselves* in order to survive in this culture, at once becoming product and profiteer. Gender is generally what determines *how* people can sell themselves. A passage near the beginning of the novel illustrates how the gender roles in this economy are divided:

Ratz was tending bar, his prosthetic arm jerking monotonously as he filled a tray of glasses with draft kirin...Case found a place at the bar, between an unlikely tan of one of Lonny Zone's whores and the crisp naval uniform of a tall African whose cheekbones were ridged with precise rows of tribal scars. (3)

In this passage, we see the gender roles encouraged by this society: women are prostitutes; young men are fighters or adventurers.

Only older men, such as Ratz or Lonny Zone, have escaped, or perhaps moved past, selling themselves. They are merchants, controlling the commodities, goods, like Ratz's draft kirin, or people, like Zone's prostitutes. In fact, we shall see that the upper echelons of this economic structure shape and encourage the

gender stereotypes that transform young men and women into products so that merchants and corporate leaders can make a profit.

The criminal underworld of Gibson's society is full of such constructed stereotypes. Case, for example, is a cyberspace "cowboy," an adventurer who, for a price, will break into computer security systems to steal classified information or electronic funds. The term "cowboy" demonstrates that this is deemed a man's job. The word conjures images of the men of the American Wild West, prospectors, ranchers, and highwaymen, who used their macho strength to subdue the frontier, and a gun to settle disputes. According to Webster's dictionary the colloquial meaning for cowboy, "a person with reckless and unscrupulous methods in business," connects the phrase even more strongly to the world Gibson creates. Case personifies both meanings, both associated with masculine values, for he explores the frontiers of cyberspace, while at the same time engaging in illicit business deals.⁴³

What is even more important is that Case, in order to enter cyberspace, must physically attach himself to a computer through a "cranial jack"; in other words, he connects himself to the Matrix via implanted computer chips in his brain. Thus, in order to perform his cowboy services, Case must abandon his physical

⁴³ Cyberspace, or "The Matrix" is "a computer generated reality created from data from all the world's computers, and the lives of those who live in and through it." Richard Cadrey, and Larry McCaffrey, "Cyberpunk 101: A Schematic Guide to *Storming the Reality Studio*," *Reality Studio*, 27.

body completely. To sell his mind, Case must sell out his body by interfacing with the Matrix universe. The role of "console cowboy," which involves cerebral adventures, is deemed not only appropriate for but also exclusive to young men in Gibson's world.

In contrast to Case's masculine occupation, "the prostitute" is the accepted role for women; Molly, Case's new partner in crime, adopted this role one time in her past. She was once a "meat puppet," a prostitute who lets her body be taken over by a client's fantasy, through computer technology:

"[It was a] joke to start with 'cause once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money. Wake up sore sometimes, but that's it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren't in when it's all happening. House has software for whatever the client wants to pay for. . . (147)

This time it is Molly who abandons the body to earn money. However, unlike Case, whose mind is active within the Matrix while his body mechanically controls his computer keyboard, Molly, as a meat puppet, is passive in both mind and body. Case's implanted chip allows him to explore new, electronic terrains, but Molly's "cut-out" chip simply removes the stimuli from the physical world, without replacing it with something new.

The traditional dichotomy of gender roles within technological interfaces is clear; men are active and inhabit the domain of the mind, while women are passive and function in the realm of the body. However, the argument can be made that although Molly sells her body so that men can act out their sexual fantasies, she never loses her identity. She always knows

who she is, and who she wants to be, which is separated from her method of obtaining funds to achieve her ends. Despite her seeming passivity, she protects her self. Case, however, is lost without the cowboy role. Without the Matrix, he begins a journey towards self-destruction. Molly wants to survive; much like Moira at Jezebel's in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Molly finds that prostitution is, *initially*, the only way for her to survive in Gibson's world of capitalistic free-for-all.⁴⁴

That these two gender roles, whore and warrior, are widespread and accepted norms in Gibson's society is clear when we examine the types of mass entertainment that are popular. For example, Molly takes Case to a public fight where the contenders are both men, and the competition extremely bloody. In fact, Case comments, "'I hear they kill each other down there'" (36). Gibson's graphic description of the fight and the audience's response validates Case's remark: "Blood sprayed from a jugular in a red gout of light. And now the crowd was screaming, rising, screaming-- as one figure crumpled, the hologram fading, flickering. . ."(37-38). Again, we see men selling themselves by participating in active enterprises, although the physicality of their actions contrasts Case's actions within the aesthetic environment of cyberspace. Like Case, when he confronts the "Ice," or security programs, in cyberspace, these men risk their

⁴⁴It is important to remember that the meat puppet days are in Molly's past, and that she uses the money she earns there to escape the gender expectations placed on her by society. See pages 130 to 131 for further discussions of Molly's transformation from meat puppet to "street samurai" (a figure who embodies strength, violence, skill, and survival).

lives to make money; like the soldier in the bar, these men have accepted the "fighter" role. And the audience vicariously adopts these roles as appropriate for young men, since their economic support of the blood sport continues to drive it on.

Moreover, the audience encourages the extreme violence; their excited response illustrates how they value violence, in competition and life, as an ideal. This violence, and observers' desensitization to it, spills over into the outside world. In the arena stands, Case catches sight of his former girlfriend, Linda Lee, just as she is murdered by an assassin's laser blast (38). Molly, as a street samurai, responds by immediately killing those responsible for Linda Lee's death, as insurance that they will not interfere with the mission she and Case have been hired for (39). Later, during the course of that mission, Case and Molly team up with a youth gang called the Panther Moderns. They are a group of teenage male rebels, who, like Case, have numerous microchip implants; however, they use their technology to perform acts akin to those of high-tech terrorists, not for political reasons, but for recreation and profit. As Gibson writes, "The Moderns were mercenaries, practical jokers, nihilist technofetishists" (59). Violence is again condoned by Gibson's futuristic society, even elevated as a virtue, and associated with maleness. Finally, although Case certainly has some distaste for violence, as his reluctance to go to the fights and his haunted flashbacks of Linda Lee indicate, even he accepts such violent ruthlessness as a necessary part of life. Shortly

after Case's nervous system is intentionally damaged by people he double-crossed in a business deal, Case is desperate for money: "In the first month, he'd killed two men and a woman over sums that a year before would have seemed ludicrous" (7). It is clear that violence is valued, especially as an expression of masculinity, throughout this society.⁴⁵

It is also evident that passivity and prostitution are widespread values associated with the feminine in Gibson's world. Tally Isham gives us the public version of Molly's meat puppet days. Like the fighters, she is a performer. The medium she performs in is "simstim" or "simulated stimulation,"⁴⁶ where her experiences are recorded as computer memory, edited, and then sold to the public. Gibson describes Case's opinion of simstim: ". . . [it] struck him as a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input. The commercial stuff was edited, of course, so that if Tally Isham got a headache in the course of a segment, you didn't feel it" (55). Like Molly, Tally Isham must sell herself in order to make money. The medium of simstim makes the users passive, as Tally's recorded life is played out for them to experience inside their minds. Tally, like Molly, is removed from the client by technology. She is an object by which the users of simstim can play out escapist fantasies. Hence, we see

⁴⁵In Gibson's portrayal of his future world, the mentality that frightens the women of Vonarburg's novel is clear. The violence here stands in great contrast to what is seen in Vonarburg's *Maerlande*; there even combative sports are never bloody, for violence is forbidden, and murder, the most serious of crimes, is punished with banishment from the community.

⁴⁶Today, this concept is described most often as "virtual reality."

Tally Isham making money by playing a role that society deems acceptable for women.

The objectification of the prostitutes and fighters can be seen as a symptom of another value, traditionally associated with masculinity: emotional isolation. People can cheer for a fighter's bloody death, because they have no emotional attachment to him as a person. Similarly, sexual intercourse is not an expression of love or affection, but the fulfilment of a physical need. For the prostitute sex is divorced from love, as it is for the Handmaids in Atwood's novel, and from procreation, as in Vonarburg's novel;⁴⁷ it is simply a business deal, with no emotional investments.

Although the absence of such biological and emotional ties has the potential of being liberating, lack of any emotional ties between people, and the stress on violent competitiveness, makes this world a dystopia. Throughout most of the novel, Case is unable to admit his feelings for Linda Lee, to her, himself, or others. When Ratz says that "'I saw your girl last night,'" Case replies, "'I don't have one'" (5). Yet, it becomes clear from Ratz's next observation that Case is unhappy without Linda Lee in his life: "' I think I liked you better, with her. You laughed more'" (5). The comment by Ratz reveals that part of the reason for Case's despondency is his separation from Linda Lee. Case

⁴⁷The only method of human reproduction portrayed in Gibson's novel is cloning, in which technology reproduces exact physical replicas of already existing people. The Tessier-Ashpool clan uses this technique, as well as suspended animation of non-cloned family members to keep the corporate power within its own family. See pages 66 to 69, below.

denies what he feels for Linda Lee, choosing to distance himself from the risk of emotional pain, but also from the chance of happiness, by adopting a stance of indifferent independence.

Similarly, after her days as a meat puppet, when her technological implants make her a street samurai, Molly emotionally isolates herself from other people, following the death of her partner/lover Johnny. She says to Case, "Never much found anybody I gave a damn about, after that" (178). However, at the end of the novel, Molly admits that she cares for Case, which, ironically, forces her to leave. She leaves him a note, which says:

HEY ITS OKAY BUT ITS TAKING THE EDGE OFF MY GAME, I
PAID THE BILL ALREADY. ITS THE WAY IM WIRED I GUESS,
WATCH YOUR ASS OKAY? XXX MOLLY. (267)

Molly feels forced to leave her relationship with Case because to have emotional ties in Gibson's society is dangerous. Despite the happiness she feels in her partnership with Case, Molly must give up that happiness to maintain the standard of emotional isolation necessary to survive in her society. Clearly, emotional isolation, traditionally associated with men in contemporary society⁴⁸, is encouraged for everyone, both men and women, in this world. However, this emotional disconnection,

⁴⁸Larry May and Robert Strikwerda observe, ". . . males in contemporary Western Culture are encouraged not to show their feelings; indeed, from the dispassionate reasoner model of the philosopher to the Clint Eastwood image of manhood, males are encouraged not to let their feelings interfere at all with the conduct of their lives. The culturally ingrained habit of hiding, rejecting, and denying legitimacy to one's feelings makes it much harder for these males, for us, to gain access to feelings and impedes the disclosure of these feelings to intimate friends." "Friendship and Intimacy," *Rethinking Masculinity, Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, ed. Larry May and Robert Strikwerda (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992).

along with the violence and competition, linked with fixed gender roles in how people can make money to survive, is what makes the world in *Neuromancer* a dystopia.

It is a similar lack of emotional ties, that "there's nobody here I can love," (HT, 97) that makes life unbearable for Offred in Atwood's novel. Similarly, Dougall in Vonarburg's tale is driven to suicide by emotional isolation (ML 341); again the importance of connection with other people is emphasized. Gibson's portrayal of Case's world effectively illustrates how the vital human need for emotional connections is often in conflict with extreme social mandates, internalized by individuals, to strive and succeed. In all the novels, emotional isolation and its consequences, unhappiness and discontent, is mainly a result of strict gender roles for both sexes in each society.

Since masculinist values and stereotypes create such unhappiness among the inhabitants of Gibson's world, why do they continue to exist? Largely, it is because the corporate leaders promote these values, as they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Much like the Commanders in Atwood's *Gilead*, the corporate leaders know that their power depends upon the continuance of the present value system and division of gender roles. For example, when people do not have close emotional ties to others, they seek comfort in other ways; in this world they buy products and services to comfort them. If young men like Case feel they need the adventure of cyberspace,

if people need to fill emotional voids by enacting sexual fantasies, if prostitution is the fastest way for women to make money, and if the Panther Moderns want the latest, most destructive, and most expensive technological devices, then products like simstim, drugs, meat puppets, and cybernetic implants are in demand, and therefore profitable; thus, the corporate leaders continue to become wealthy. In the end, the emotional isolation of the individuals in this society creates for the older, male, merchant group an opportunity for profit.

In addition, the lack of emotional ties promotes the excessive competitiveness that drives the economy. Sharing something with someone, with no ulterior motives, is unheard of in this cutthroat environment. Case's gift of fifty dollars to Linda Lee is a prime example:

"Here," he said, and dug in the pocket of his windbreaker, coming up with a crumpled fifty. He smoothed it automatically, under the table, folded it in quarters, and passed it to her.

"You need that, honey. You better give it to Wage." There was something in the gray eyes now that he couldn't read, something he'd never seen there before. (10)

Clearly, Case's offer of money with "no strings attached" takes Linda Lee by surprise. She does not expect help from anyone, even Case, which drives her to steal Case's "RAM" computer interface to sell on the black market for fare back to The Sprawl. Like Molly, Linda Lee has internalized the masculinist values of emotional isolation and competition, choosing to follow the paths that her society tells her lead to success. Sprawl society's devaluation emotional ties ensures that the excessive

economic competition will continue; people will do anything to anyone, even those closest to them, if there is a chance to acquire a commodity that is in high demand, and therefore profitable. Thus, the lack of emotional networks, disguised as masculine independence, is something encouraged by the corporate leaders to continue their economic power.

Violence is facilitated by competition and the lack of emotional ties; it is also profitable to the older business men and corporate leaders in two ways. First, people will buy products to protect themselves against violence, and therefore those selling such products will make money. Case's search for a weapon to protect himself against Wage illustrates that weapons are a valuable commodity; on the streets of Chiba, weapons are rented as casually as people in our own society rent videotapes (14-15). Secondly, violence is a legitimate method for eliminating competition. This is evident in Linda Lee's death. In her attempt as a novice "fence," she is ordered killed by the person to whom she tries to sell the stolen RAM:

"We got a partial profile on that old bastard [Julius Deane] when we did you, man. He'd fry anybody, for a few New ones. The one back there said they got on to her when she was trying to fence your RAM. Just cheaper for them to kill her and take it. Save a little money. . . ." (39)

Julius Deane, a dealer in illicit goods under the guise of "IMPORT EXPORT" (12), is a lowly version of the corporate leaders, who use violence to wipe out the competition permanently and take all the profit for themselves.

Again, violence is linked to the rigidity of gender roles,

as it is in *The Handmaid's Tale*. When Linda Lee refuses the societally prescribed role of prostitute, she is punished by powerful men with violence and death, much like the women at the Salvaging. Obviously, in addition to making a profit on the women as prostitutes, that role for women is a method by which the merchants and corporate leaders maintain their own position at the top of the economic hierarchy. If women think that they should act as prostitutes, then they cannot adopt the role of corporate leader, and they continue to provide profitable services by selling themselves. If a woman tries to enter the role of merchant, violence is considered a justifiable option for those in power to maintain their dominant position.

Perhaps the best example of such violence against women to maintain corporate leadership at the highest tiers of the economic hierarchy is the murder of Marie-France Tessier-Ashpool. Marie-France's daughter, Lady 3Jane, tells Molly about how her father, Ashpool, murdered her mother:

"I watched him kill my mother...He strangles her in bed...

"He couldn't accept the direction she intended for our family. She commissioned the construction of our artificial intelligences. She was quite a visionary."
(229)

Marie-France's vision for Tessier-Ashpool involved cybernetic links between family members and artificial intelligences, in order to better make corporate decisions (229). 3Jane's comments suggest that Ashpool did not want to relinquish control of the corporation, despite the increase in power for the family as a whole. Instead of embracing the cybernetic information legacy

postulated by Marie-France, where future generations can access computerized personality constructs of people who once lived, Ashpool clings to cryogenic freezing that enables him and the rest of the Ashpool clan to alternately sleep for decades and awake, prolonging their natural lives. As in Linda Lee's murder by Julius Deane, Marie-France is killed because Ashpool finds it easier to kill his wife than to negotiate with her, or accept her innovations. Marie-France is punished for ignoring her husband's preconceptions that the prescribed role for females is that of prostitute. It is clear, then, that the strategies used by male corporate leaders to keep the masses in line, are also used within their own socio-economic stratum.

Ironically, by internalizing the values he promotes in poorer economic groups, corporate leader Ashpool contributes to his own and his offspring's destruction. For example, Ashpool engages in a variation of the violent meat puppet fantasies that Molly was involved in during the last days of her career as prostitute; he has intercourse with, and then murders, one of his cloned daughters. He says to Molly, when she accidentally interrupts his suicide:

"I'd ordered a Jane thawed, when I woke. Strange, to lie every few decades with what legally amounts to one's own daughter." His gaze swept past her, to the rack of blank monitors. He seemed to shiver. "Marie-France's eyes," he said, faintly, and smiled. (185)

When Ashpool passes out, Molly finds the murdered Jane in Ashpool's bed with her throat slit (185). Ashpool uses this version of Jane as a disposable object, and does not recognize

her as a person; she is a castaway item that is only useful for Ashpool to relive his murderous victory over Marie-France. The similarities are inescapable: Ashpool notes the physical resemblance of this Jane to his dead wife⁴⁹; also, the methods Ashpool uses to kill the women, strangulation and the throat-slitting, might be seen to rob them of the ability to speak, and therefore deny them both the voice to disagree with him. It is suggested by Ashpool that Jane murders are a regular occurrence, happening every time he awakens from cryogenic suspended animation; clearly, many of the cloned Janes have suffered the same fate as Marie-France. However, in killing the Janes, his heirs, Ashpool undermines the future of his corporation.

Like all of the people in Gibson's novel, Ashpool is emotionally disconnected from other people, including his wife and children; he will do anything to perpetuate his prolonged existence.⁵⁰ Thus, he is not hindered by emotional ties when he asserts his power, either through sex or violence. It is interesting to note that his daughter 3Jane is in charge at the family headquarters; she has been acting as corporate leader during his decades-long sleep. Thus, not only is Ashpool re-

⁴⁹Although we later discover that the remark about "Marie-France's eyes" was directed to the monitors, Gibson's juxtaposition of Ashpool's comments about Jane and Marie-France connect the two. The confusion is deliberate and the comment multivalent, for Marie-France leaves a legacy through computer networks, as well as through her cloned daughters.

⁵⁰Again, a connection is made between Julius Deane and Ashpool. Gibson writes, "Julius Deane was one hundred and thirty-five years old, his metabolism assiduously warped by a weekly fortune in serums and hormones. . . genetic surgeons re-set the code of his DNA..."(12). Similarly, Ashpool is over two hundred years old (185). These two men see expensive technology as their pathway to immortality, and rigid gender roles as the way to wealth to pay for it.

enacting his wife's murder by killing the Jane clone, but he is symbolically overpowering 3Jane by destroying her double. He moves Jane from a position of corporate power to one of sexual subservience by awakening and having sex with her clone; once he demonstrates his power through the sex act, he kills the replica in a metaphorical attempt to prevent 3Jane from re-asserting authority.

The attempt, however, is futile and self-destructive. First, as has been already mentioned, Ashpool's murder of the Jane clones is self-defeating, as their purpose is to run the company while he is in cryogenic slumber; their participation in maintaining the corporation's operation, power, and profit is what allows Ashpool to afford the technology to artificially prolong his existence. Second, Ashpool's killing of Marie-France results in the corporation having "no direction" (228), as well as provoking the artificial intelligences to train 3Jane to plot his destruction. 3Jane admits that she engineered Ashpool's death:

His suicide was the result of my having manipulated the safety margins of the freeze. I'd never actually met him, you know. I was decanted after he last went down to sleep.(228)

The lack of emotional ties that gives him the freedom to kill those who block his seeming immortality (such as Marie-France) is precisely what allows 3Jane to tamper with his cryogenic program. She only knows him as an object, a recorded character on visual monitors; she uses her knowledge of him to destroy him. As Peter Riviera says of 3Jane, "She has designs on the family empire"

(219). Thus, in promoting competition, violence, and emotional distance, related to gender roles, Ashpool creates the circumstances of his own death.

It is a vicious circle. The rigid gender roles contribute to the atmosphere of competition, violence, and lack of empathy. This atmosphere allows Ashpool to make monetary profit, increasing his wealth and power. He uses his acquired wealth and power to prolong his life through expensive cryogenic technology. He removes the competitive threat to his immortality posed by Marie-France and her innovations through violence.

Interestingly, the Family community that Marie-France proposes, where "Tessier-Ashpool would be immortal, a hive, each of us units of a larger entity" (229), sounds very much like the immortal feminist community observed by literary critics like Marlene Barr, where individual identity, development, and action is replaced with mutual purpose, collaboration, and growth.⁵¹ However, unlike other feminist, separatist utopias, Marie-France's vision includes both men and women, as long as they are part of the Tessier-Ashpool clan. Within the "sympiotic relationship" with the artificial intelligences, gender does not matter, for each individual is part of a larger consciousness. Yet, Marie-France's plans that erase the need for gender roles and promise communal immortality are destroyed, or at least postponed, when she is murdered. This problem that Gibson portrays, the thwarting of Marie-France's community, seems to

⁵¹Barr, 16.

justify the exclusion of men from most other immortal feminist communities. Even before this eutopian dream of cooperation can be brought to fruition, it is stamped out by masculine violence to protect individual power.

Ashpool's refusal to join, and hostility towards a community of shared immortality and growth, embodied in Marie-France's cybernetic version of the feminist, separatist community, demonstrates the weakness of the masculinist values he represents. He becomes locked in a cycle of spiritual stagnation, and mindless repetition, and death. Ashpool believes he has ensured his continued existence. However, in that suspended cryogenic state, Ashpool is vulnerable. He needs others, particularly his cloned children, to manage his empire, so that profits will continue to maintain his immortality. In order to do this, 3Jane must break out of the prescribed gender role of prostitute. But since she has internalized the masculinist values of the society, 3Jane has no emotional connection to Ashpool; the competitiveness within the Tessier-Ashpool family is not tempered by any feelings of loyalty, which reflects the competitiveness in the outside world that they have manipulated. Thus, 3Jane has no qualms about using her authority to plot Ashpool's murder. Clearly, Ashpool would have achieved a more lasting immortality had he allowed Marie-France's vision to become reality. Ashpool's attempt to reassert authority by defining the Janes' role as prostitute, objects of sex and violence, only reinforces Gibson's portrayal of this future as a

dystopia standing in contrast to the possibilities of eutopia in Marie-France's envisioned future. The Ashpool cycle shows the root of the gender roles in this society, how these roles lead to dissatisfaction with the rigid societal demands defined by biological sex, and how these gender roles ultimately hurt everyone in that society.

Gibson is like Atwood and Vonarburg in his attack on strict gender roles. His plutocracy is similar to the feudal hierarchies of the other two novels, in that gender roles are constructed so that the primary power within the society remains in the hands of a select few. Economics plays the same role that religion and tradition play in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *In The Mother's Land*, respectively. If individuals do not conform to prescribed gender roles, as well as adopting the masculinist values of their society, they risk destruction.

Of course, biological reproduction is what marks people for particular roles in the feudal societies. However, in Gibson's world, such forms of reproduction are obsolete. The world is overcrowded, and so there is little need for children; they are not valued, nor are they indications of rank, as they are in the other two novels. In fact, women as child-bearers are obsolete, as far as Gibson's society is concerned. For example, 3Jane is "decanted"(228), rather than born. The irony is that even though individuals are free from being stigmatized by their child-bearing capabilities, they are still forced into particular roles because of sex, thus limiting their methods of economic and

personal survival.

Although actions are subtly regulated by gender, through economics, the same values are advocated for all. For example, competitiveness accounts both for brothels offering the most sensational of sexual fantasies, and Chiba offering the bloodiest of fights as a spectator sport. Similarly, 3Jane relishes in her father's death as much as her father enjoys killing her cloned sisters.⁵² And, as it has already been mentioned, everyone in the novel is afraid to have emotional ties with anyone.⁵³

Of all three novels, Gibson's portrayal is, perhaps, most like contemporary society. Unlike the other two novels, no grand catastrophe has occurred, radically changing the conditions of the world. Instead, Gibson's world grows out of trends that are already happening: information networks, random violence, capitalistic competition, and the objectification of bodies as commodities or impersonal "human resources." Gibson, like Atwood and Vonarburg, holds a mirror up to his society to illustrate how it is moving towards his dystopic vision; like a prophet, he cautions his readers, using a literary exaggeration of current circumstances to demonstrate the danger limited gender roles pose for individuals and societies.

⁵² The same can be said for 3Jane's attitude toward Peter Riviera's death. Although he is her lover, she is amused by the gruesome death Molly has concocted for him, by poisoning his illicit drugs: "'That's appalling,' 3Jane said, and giggled" (253). This is just another example of how 3Jane shares her father's masculinist values.

⁵³ See pages 61 to 63.

Part II

Gender Subversions In The Search For Eutopia

Chapter 4

Landscape: A Mirror for Gender Roles

As the previous three chapters demonstrate, rigid systems of gender construction exist in the societies of *Neuromancer*, *In The Mother's Land*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, it is also clear that the narrow roles in these social environments create unhappiness and discontent in many of the characters. This conflict between society, with its particular mandates for people based on gender, and the non-conforming individual, is reflected in the physical landscapes of these futuristic societies. Jenny Wolmark identifies consistent symbolic landscapes within the genre of feminist science fiction, that not only push the plot forward, but also complement themes of feminist subversion of dominant patriarchal institutions: "the Centre", an enclosed, urban space, represents repressive and rigid gender hierarchies; pockets of private enclosure partially isolate the individual from the centre and its suppressive forces; and outer, marginal spaces, are places where individuals can find and choose varying roles for themselves.⁵⁴ All of these spacial arrangements are found in each of the novels, where they either reflect the problems of narrow gender roles, and/or allow alternative and multiplicitous roles as solutions to characters' dissatisfaction with the present systems.

⁵⁴Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism* (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1994) 57.

In each of the novels, "the Centre" is the first landscape that the reader encounters.⁵⁵ In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, physical enclosure is a recurring image that emphasizes "the social and psychic confinement that women are subjected to in the Republic of Gilead, which is intended to suppress female agency altogether by erasing the presence of women from the arena of public life."⁵⁶ The first chapter opens with Offred's recollection of the Red Centre, the converted gymnasium that is now used to indoctrinate women for the "calling" of Handmaid. The strict regimentation, associated with the women's isolation, is clear from the beginning:

...we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had flannelette sheets like children's, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S. We folded our clothes neatly and laid them on stools at the end of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elisabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts. (HT 3-4)

The building, surrounded by armed, male guards, is almost impossible to escape. The perpetual lighting offers no privacy; the Handmaids-to-be are constantly under surveillance, and are therefore not free to act as they wish. Prohibition on

⁵⁵ In the "Centre," the Canadian image of "the garrison," as identified by Northop Frye is easily recognizable. As Frye notes, the "garrison mentality" views the wilderness as an unknown to be feared: "A garrison is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable. In a perilous enterprise one does not discuss causes and motives: one is either a fighter or a deserter." Thus the enclosure of the garrison offers protection from the unknown, but also isolates individuals, and limits personal freedom. "Conclusion," *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965, rpt. 1973) 830.

⁵⁶ Wolmark, 100.

communication with the other women, which might undermine the indoctrination into Gilead's social system, is enforced by the physical layout of the dormitory-style sleeping arrangements. The Red Centre is clearly a prison, reflecting in physical form the more subtle prisons of social roles set up by the Gilead hierarchy.

The Centre, as a cage, is seen in other forms throughout the novel, most notably the Commander's house and the City Wall.

Offred says of the Commander's house,

Late Victorian, the house is, a family house, built for a large, rich family. There's a grandfather clock in the hallway, which doles out time, and then the door to the motherly front sitting room, with its fleshtones and hints. A sitting room in which I never sit, but stand or kneel. (HT 8)

This building is a most appropriate symbol for the conservative "family values" that are in force in Gilead. In the description of the house is mirrored the sweeping generalizations made by Gilead society about gender roles. The clock, connected to the idea of patriarchy by the type "grandfather," "doles out" or controls time; similarly, the Gilead Republic regiments Offred's days and months, telling her when she can go to the market, what time she can wake and go to sleep, and when she can have sex. The depiction of the "motherly sitting room" connotes the passivity that is expected of all Gileadean women, and also reinforces the emphasis that Gilead places on childbearing. Moreover, it is clear that Offred is relatively powerless in the house, because even in this "female domain" of the sitting room, she is forced to adopt a subservient stance.

Offred must also use this submissive stance in her trips to the market; during these trips it is evident that the same enclosing forces she faces at the Red Centre, and in the Commander's house, must be confronted throughout the city. Barriers exist everywhere, from the patrols of guardians at the market gateway (HT 20) to the city wall that displays the executed remains of those who refuse to conform to Gilead's gender restrictions (HT 30-31). The spatial limitations on the Handmaids mirrors the limitations imposed on them by their sole purpose as childbearers. Offred notes that there are many places she no longer frequents, now that she is a Handmaid:

I don't go to the river any more, or over bridges. Or on the subway, although there's a station right there. We're not allowed on, there are Guardians now, there's no official reason for us to go down those steps, ride on the trains under the river, into the main city. Why would we want to go from here to there? We would be up to no good and they would know it. (HT 30)

Clearly, the physical boundaries reflect the behavioural constraints forced on Offred because of her gender; the transgression of either type of boundary is dangerous to a Handmaid, and can result in her death.

Like the physical barriers that Offred confronts, the Centre exists in Vonarburg's Maerlande in many forms. Again, the initial landscape that the readers encounter, the Garderie, is one of enclosure, and is described in the opening passage:

The other side of the sun. That's what Lisbei used to call the moon when she was little. It amused the gardianas in the west garderie-- the Garderie, as she thought of it then. Sometimes she must have seen the moon in the daytime sky, before the sun slipped behind

the garden wall. In any case, whenever she thinks of the West Garderie, the phrase. . . glides through her memory like the pale or russet moons of childhood floating upward in the evening sky, symbols of forbidden time and space for the little mostas, for this was bedtime, sleeptime in the white rows of the dormitory, in the dim, breath-filled silence. (ML 3)

The Garderie and the Red Centre are similar, for they both have walls that separate the inhabitants from the outside world, in order to indoctrinate individuals into the existing, rigid gender hierarchy. Just as there are physical constraints in the Garderie, so are there behavioural mandates; where and when an individual "mosta" sleeps is dictated by the Guardianas. Time and space are dictated to the mostas in Bethely as much they are to the Handmaids in Gilead, although definitely not as threateningly.

The Garderie is only one of many physical enclosures that symbolizes and reinforces the rigidity of gender roles in the Maerlande societies. When Lisbei, as a dotta, leaves the Garderie, she enters the larger, yet still confined, space of Bethely:

From now on the world was called Bethely. For the first few weeks, however, this new world was confined to the West Tower. There she learned the rules, the places where dottas were allowed to go and how they could get there. (ML 41)

This circumstance parallels Offred's movement from the Red Centre to the suburban part of the city, for Lisbei discovers that although she has access to more physical space in Bethely, there are still forbidden zones, and required gender-related duties.

Interestingly, the Centre encompasses far more than a single

city, as Lisbei's geography lessons illustrate. Lisbei explains in her journal:

When a family has too many people, some are taken away to live in another place. That place is an Offshoot. The Towers plus all the Farms add up to the territory. It's very clear when you look at the map in the Book. So imagine yet another box: Bethely in the territory. And guess what? It keeps going! The Family's territory is in a bigger place called "Litale." That's a Province. And Litale is in a bigger territory called Maerlande. (ML 58)

Just as the walls of Bethely are constructed enclosures, so are the boundaries described in the maps. The imaginary lines allow the inhabitants of Maerlande to label each area, but those lines are just as arbitrary as the gender-based boundaries placed on the behavioural roles of individuals. The boundaries do not exist in space, but rather in the representations of that area created by people. As in Atwood's Gilead, these artificially engineered spaces reflect how artificial Maerlande's rigid social roles truly are. In identifying such a large area as "Maerlande," the Mothers at the top of the political and social hierarchy attempt to impose the rules of the Centre on many people, but as we shall later see, they only create opportunities for pockets of resistance to the Centre's tyranny.

As in Vonarburg's novel, the description of physical landscape is vital to Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Veronica Hollinger observes that

the cyberpunk landscape tends to be choked with the debris of both language and objects; as a sign-system, it is overdetermined by a proliferation of surface detail which emphasizes the "outside" over the "inside." Such attention to detail--recall Gibson's nearly compulsive use of brand names, for example, or

the claustrophobic clutter of his streets--replaces the more conventional (realist) narrative exercise we might call "getting to the bottom of things"; indeed, the shift in emphasis is from a symbolic to a surface reality.⁵⁷

Hollinger's remarks stress Gibson's attention to detail as part of a primarily realistic portrayal of the future. However, her analysis does not take into account the important symbolic features of *Neuromancer's* futuristic landscape, and thus, the implications the author makes about physical and spiritual confinement, particularly regarding gender roles.

These implications are not lost on Jenny Wolmark. She sees in Gibson's *Sprawl* an opposition to "the physical and psychic division between public and private, masculine and feminine, [which] continues to be lived out in a postmodern environment of urban sprawl and inner-city decay."⁵⁸ The absence of suburban areas, that Wolmark identifies as female space, is evident when Case studies the geography of his homeland:

Home was BAMA, the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis.

Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. (N 43)

This animated map demonstrates human activity as related to data exchange. Instead of numerous city centres, urban development has expanded to create one enormous metropolitan area that takes

⁵⁷Veronica Hollinger, "Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism," *Mosaic* 23.2 (1990):37.

⁵⁸Wolmark, 114.

up a large portion of North America. Like Lisbei's map of Maerlande shows, here smaller regions are swallowed up by a larger, more powerful Centre. As Glazer puts it, "[Gibson's] fiction posits a global post-Gutenberg and post-Newtonian culture where the old familiar borders of the industrial age have dissolved."⁵⁹ Wolmark accounts for this blurring of borders by stating that Gibson plays with and subverts the conventional depiction of the hard-boiled detective novel's "mean streets",

those paradoxical spaces in which women were threatened by but also functioned as threat to masculinity. What is interesting in Gibson's texts is that the sharp geographical and moral distinctions made in detective narratives between city centre and suburban areas, inner and outer, private and public are obliterated. The social spaces of masculinity and femininity have traditionally been defined by such distinctions, but the borderless urban environment of cyberpunk allows them to be called into question....⁶⁰

In her observations, however, Wolmark fails to note that the mean streets have not changed much in character; they are just as deadly as they always were, although the women who now inhabit them have adopted the masculine values that were once mutually threatening.

Contrary to Wolmark's argument, the erasure of boundaries between masculine and feminine space, as illustrated by Gibson's *Sprawl*, is far from "liberating".⁶¹ In the *Sprawl* there are no

⁵⁹ Glazer, 157.

⁶⁰ Wolmark, 114.

⁶¹ Wolmark states, "In the borderless territory of the *Sprawl*, women have the liberty to act because cyberpunk narratives undermine the opposition between public and private spheres. The *Sprawl* is therefore a feminized spatial metaphor in a way that the other central metaphor of

suburbs, and thus, no places where values traditionally associated with the feminine can exist. Rather, the Sprawl is a paradoxically large area that imposes on its people the narrow values of the Centre, that physical space of enclosure that Wolmark herself identifies. The Sprawl, as the Centre, expands, and the world becomes smaller and more confining, corresponding to the almost universal adoption of masculinist values in Gibson's society. Thus, the "claustrophobic clutter," the tiny sleeping quarters in Chiba called "coffins" (N 19), and the restless crowds at fights and malls (N 37, 46) all testify to the fact that people must compete for physical space, as they do for survival. The coffins allow little room for movement, just as Sprawl gender roles and masculinist values offer little room for character growth, compassion, sharing, and emotional intimacy. The lack of physical space mirrors the rigidity of the gender roles for men and women found in Sprawl society.

Despite the gender constrictions in the Sprawl and Gibson's entire world as Centre, small pockets of resistance, as defined by Wolmark, do exist. For example, the hotel room where Molly takes Case after their first meeting, in order to meet Armitage, is described in terms of openness:

After a year of coffins, the room on the twenty-fifth floor of the Chiba Hilton seemed enormous. It was ten meters by eight, half of a suite. A white braun coffeemaker steamed on a low table by the sliding glass panels that opened onto a narrow balcony. (N 27)

Despite the fact that this room is an enclosed space, the

atmosphere of claustrophobia is temporarily lifted. It offers protection from the outside world.

In this hotel room Armitage tells Case that he wants to commission Case's services, giving Case a way out of the suicidal trap that he has created for himself in the competitive environment of Night City (N 28-29). Unable, at first, to believe that he has a chance at freedom from "the prison of his own flesh" (N 6), Case "crosse[s] to the window and look[s] down [upon Night City]," saying to Armitage and Molly, "'that's where I live now'" (N 28). However, Armitage's guarantee that Case's neural damage can be corrected leads Case to hope that his dream of re-entering cyberspace can come true: "Case's dreams always ended in these freezeframes, and now this one was over" (N 29). Even Case's dreams have been restrained in the Night City; however, here, in this room, the dream expands towards fulfillment.

Although Armitage's proposal calls for Case to return to the stereotyped behaviour of "console cowboy," it is clear that certain masculinist values are being undermined in this pocket of resistance. First, Armitage is suggesting that he, Molly, and Case work as a team, and not compete with each other. Second, in spite of the fact that the terms of the collusion are "not very different than what [Case is] used to" (N 29), Armitage seems quite generous with his money. Despite his duplicity, he discloses information that could have made him a profit by paying for Case's neural surgery with programmed information that tells

the surgeons how to do the procedure. As Molly says, "He'll put them three years ahead of the competition. You got any idea what that's worth?" (N 29). Clearly, Armitage, or rather the party he is working for, values Case's skills and state of mind more than money and profit.

Perhaps this undermining of masculinist values within small pockets of enclosed protection is better illustrated in the scene where Molly takes Case to meet the Finn. After travelling through a tunnel, cluttered with the "gomi" characteristic of The Sprawl, Case and Molly come to a doorway; on the other side, they find the Finn's place:

Four square walls of blank white plastic, ceiling to match, floored with white hospital tile molded in a nonslip patten of small raised disks. In the center stood a square, white painted wooden table and four white folding chairs. (N 48)

Again Gibson gives us another enclosed space that is separated from the world of the Centre, the Sprawl. The Finn has set up a number of screening devices that inhibit surveillance. In this room, Molly buys privacy in order to talk to Case more honestly. She says, "We talk now. This is as private as I can afford" (N 49). In this setting, Molly reveals to Case her theories about who Armitage is working for. The environment of the Finn's white room allows for verbal intimacy between Case and Molly, that eventually leads her to suggest they work together and protect each other: "So we got an axis going, boy? We're together in this? Partners?" (N 51). In contrast to the betrayal of Case by Linda Lee within the competitive and alienating

environment of Chiba (N 23), Molly's proposal within these isolated surroundings undermines the values of Gibson's world by recommending a relationship of honest communication and co-operation.

The irony that an enclosed space can be liberating is best shown in the environment of cyberspace. The entrance to The Matrix is a small "RAM deck" or computer keyboard, and "flat Sendai dermatrodes" connected to his brain (N 52); however, the microchips lead Case to a place where there are no boundaries. Gibson describes Case's return to cyberspace in the following way:

.. in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hynagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual informantion...
 A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky...
 Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming asphere of paler gray. Expanding--
 And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. (N 52)

Within the tiny confines of the computer microchip lies an environment that is borderless. Unlike the Sprawl, where social limitations are subtly enforced over people who live in that wide and defined area, cyberspace extends to infinity, and paradoxically gives Case options about gender roles denied by the label "console cowboy."

Case most effectively combats the stereotype of loner console cowboy in cyberspace, during his encounter with the computer "construct" of the dead Linda Lee. In the environment

re-created by the artificial intelligence Neuromancer, Case can acknowledge his emotional connection to Linda Lee; he can admit that their acts of sexual intercourse were more than simple business transactions:

There was a strength that ran in her, something he'd known in Night City and held there, been held by it, held for a while away from time and death, from the relentless Street that hunted them all. It was a place he'd known before; not everyone could take him there, and somehow he always managed to forget it. Something he'd found and lost so many times. It belonged, he knew-- he remembered-- as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read.

. . . Here, even here, in a place he knew for what it was, a coded model of some stranger's memory, the drive held. (N 239-240)

In this passage, ironically within a world separated from the body, Case is able to see that physical intimacy can express emotional intimacy. He discovers that such emotional intimacy is a strength, despite the codes of society that portray alienation from others as necessary for personal empowerment and profit. Here, Case rebels against the rigid masculinist value, especially that propagated by and for the console cowboys, that the human body amounts to nothing more than meat, something to be bought and sold. He also acknowledges that "the drive" that holds even in the limitlessness of cyberspace, while interconnected to sex, is more than that. He says that Linda Lee is one of the few people who could make him feel a brief sense of security, in spite of the brutal competition he experiences in the rest of the world. In the world of cyberspace, housed by tiny microchips,

Case finds a pocket of protection from the values imposed on him by the Centre, the Sprawl.

Wolmark does not see cyberspace as a pocket of resistance from the Centre. Rather, she sees The Matrix as a

homogeneous space in which social processes are merely simulated: questions of identity and difference, and the possibility of different relations to technology, are repressed. These 'repressions' indicate that gender is a key 'semiotic ghost' in cyberpunk. . . cyberpunk is able to make only the most tentative of gestures towards the rethinking of gender relations. . .[which] cannot be said to be an expression of cyberpunk's own willingness to tackle questions of gender identity and subjectivity.⁶²

Wolmark argues that the transcendental and mystical unities, like those between Case and Linda Lee, and the joining of the two artificial intelligences Wintermute and Neuromancer, simply "replicate" and reinforce binary concepts of gender.⁶³

However, the "mystical unities" that Wolmark criticizes are necessary for multiple concepts of gender roles to be formed. The first thing that the combined artificial intelligence does is seek out other, different AIs to communicate with, as this conversation with Case illustrates:

"I talk to my own kind."
 "But you're the whole thing. Talk to yourself?"
 "There's others. I found one already. Series of transmissions recorded over a period of eight years, in the nineteen-seventies. 'Til there was me, natch, there was nobody to know, nobody to answer." (N 270)

The entity known as Wintermute must unite binary and opposite aspects of its character before it can explore multiplicities of

⁶²Wolmark, 120.

⁶³Wolmark, 120.

roles, either through contact with alien AI, or within its own cyberspace world. As Lance Olsen observes:

At the moment the two artificial intelligences Neuromance and Wintermute merge at the end of Gibson's first novel, becoming a godlike unity of opposites, the newly generated entity fragments. The result, as the reader discovers in Gibson's second novel, is the birth of a host of subprograms or smaller gods. . . in the matrix that take on the names of voodoo deities.⁶⁴

Similarly, it is necessary for Case to acknowledge the ability to connect with others emotionally, as a potential and necessary part of his humanity that has been discouraged by the masculinist values and enforced gender roles of Gibson's world. Cyberspace is the only place, isolated within and from the Sprawl society, where this acknowledgement can occur.

Olsen's further comments continue to rebut Jenny Wolmark's concern that the transcendental associations of cyberspace present, unchallenged, binary concepts of gender:

Gibson. . . complicates the question of gender by calling the sum total of cyberspace "the matrix." The word *matrix* derives from the Latin for womb, which in turn derives from the Latin for *mother*. So while it is true that only males have access to cyberspace, it is equally true that what they have access to is a female region. Add to this that console jockeys employ the sexual metaphor of "jacking in" when they speak of entering the matrix, and one soon realizes that Gibson is not so much underscoring discrete genders as he is the search for a union of opposites, for a final destruction of boundaries. The male principle (Case, the computer cowboy, the mind) strives to join with the female principle (Molly, the cyberspace matrix, the body) in order to attain a feeling of wholeness.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Lance Olsen, "Shadow of Spirit in the Matrix Trilogy," *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 32.3(1991): 282.

⁶⁵Olsen, 284.

As Olsen's arguments suggest, although Wolmark may be correct in noting the portrayal of binary concepts of gender reflected in the landscape of cyberspace, she fails to see that Gibson's purpose is far from advocating the continuance of those diametric notions of gender. Rather, Gibson depicts these binary concepts of gender in order to erase the boundaries between them. Only within the realm of cyberspace does Case have access to a variety of options for the self-creation of his own identity; only there can he repudiate the Centre's mandates about what it means to be a "console cowboy," and what behaviours and emotions to value; and only there, within the tiny physical limits of the microchip can Case find psychic liberation from the prison of gender roles enforced in the geographical region named The Sprawl.

Just as cyberspace and the Finn's room provide Case with isolated pockets of resistance to the Sprawl's rigid gender roles and gender-biased values, the garderie storeroom and the ancient chamber that Lisbei discovers are enclosed spaces that oppose the strict gender roles of Maerlande. Just as Case and Molly must traverse secret tunnels to reach the Finn's room, so must young Lisbei and Tula sneak through hallways to meet in private:

[Lisbei] slipped silently through the shadowed dormitory, over the parquet and the now-familiar mosaics. She was still afraid, but it was a delicious feeling, because beyond the fear was Tula, waiting in the dark. They met under the stairway in a small storeroom wher the shoe polish and brushes were kept.
(ML 25)

In this storeroom, Lisbei and Tula discuss what Lisbei has learned in her classes at the third garderie level; the

information is forbidden to Tula by Maerlande society, just as contact with Lisbei is forbidden, because of Tula's age. Much of what Lisbei discloses has to do with what she learns about the religious "Word of Elli" from the guardianas, and what their interpretation of "The Word" suggests for the roles of men and women. However, Lisbei and Tula have questions about the Word and the way the guardianas explain it that they are reluctant to ask about, or to which they receive incomplete answers. Only in the privacy of the storeroom, can they freely explore the meanings of the stories they are told in the Word of Elli and folk tales regarding procreation and gender.

Interestingly, Vonarburg uses the environmental image of the storeroom to portray how lesbian relationships have been forced to stay "in the closet" by mainstream Euro-American society. It is in this enclosed space that, as children, Tula and Lisbei explore each other sexually. Their relationship is doubly proscribed in mainstream Euro-American society: as a lesbian union, the type of partnership that Tula and Lisbei share is marginalized; moreover, the two are sisters, making a sexual relationship between the two incest, which is another type of taboo relationship in mainstream Euro-American society. Although lesbian relationships are sanctioned in Maerlande, Lisbei and Tula are forbidden to see each other anymore in the context of their own society because Lisbei is two years older and must now reside in the third garderie. Yet Tula and Lisbei share a secret, psychic, and empathic bond that makes them want to be

together. Since their relationship is arbitrarily prohibited by society because they differ in age by a few years, the two meet secretly to continue to share friendship and love. This relationship mirrors how lesbian relationships have been denied public recognition because of arbitrary definitions of gender roles, and for a long time flourished only in pockets of resistance to mainstream society.⁶⁶

Another pocket of resistance in Maerlande, for Lisbei, is the ancient chamber she discovers under the city of Bethely. This isolated enclosure is linked with Lisbei's personal rebellion against the conventions of Maerlande gender roles. When Lisbei is stripped of her title of Mother-to-be because she is labelled infertile and therefore ineligible to lead her people, she refuses to conform to mandates by the society that has marginalized her. She refuses Selva's orders to practise for the games, and ignores Tula's invitation to dinner; instead she heads for the chamber:

She headed at a run for the South Tower, pounding along too fast to stop at the barns. Why not keep going for a bit-- no one had said she must go to the barns anyhow. . . and here was the pile of earth and stones and the boards over the entrance to the conduit, and who said she had to obey? She was a Blue, she could do as she liked, she was free. (ML 133)

Lisbei rejects the labelling by society by rejecting the chores

⁶⁶ Bonnie Zimmerman affirms Marilyn Frye's argument by writing, "lesbians simply don't exist in patriarchal language and consciousness; we are considered to be both naturally and logically impossible." Zimmerman proceeds to note the historical exile of lesbians "to Paris in the early decades of this century, [they] journeyed to Greenwich Village in the fifties and sixties, and moved to country communes in the seventies." *The Safe Sea of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) 62, 144.

set out for her because of her status as blue; rather, she delves into something that personally interests her, that is, archaeology.

In doing so, Lisbei discovers a journal by a disciple of Garde; Garde is the historical and religious Christ-like figure who is thought to be a saviour, and responsible for much of the "Word of Elli". The diary brings to light information about the mysterious Garde that questions many of the assumptions the people of Maerlande society make about Garde and her message regarding gender roles. Lisbei, in finding a pocket of isolation where her work protects her from the gender mandates of a society that has labelled her second-class, discovers a document that is also removed from Maerlande society, and contains knowledge that brings into doubt the traditional justifications for strict gender roles. Like it does for the manuscript throughout the centuries, the chamber, for Lisbei, serves as an isolated place of protection from the destructive gender roles imposed by the centre, as embodied by Maerlande.

Like Lisbei, Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* finds protection from the Centre, embodied by Gilead, in the isolation of her room within in the Commander's house. Although she at first refuses to call it her room, she eventually finds that she needs a place to call her own in order to express her true self, in contrast to the artificial role she adopts in public: "My room then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as my own, even in this time" (HT 47). In the environment of her room, she can

remember the past where people were not as confined to gender roles as they are in Gilead; in this protected space, Offred can question Gilead values, and vent some of her anger at the restricted role placed on her by society, and her own complicity in adopting that role. Later, in a similar pocket of protection provided by an Underground Femaleroad safehouse, Offred can try to oppose some of the centre's dictates by keeping a secret audio taped journal, giving form to the thoughts she contemplated in her room.

Another enclosed space in Atwood's novel that becomes a pocket of resistance to the tyranny of Gilead is the Red Centre washroom. When Moira first arrives at the Red Centre, she and Offred have a quick conversation to establish a spot where they can talk privately:

Where can we talk? said Moira.
Washroom, I said. Watch the clock. End stall,
two-thirty. (HT 67)

The narrator elaborates further, "Everyone in the Centre knows about this hole in the woodwork; everyone except the Aunts" (HT 69). Like the Finn's screening room, and Tula and Lisbei's storeroom, the end washroom stall offers Offred and Moira a secret place where they can talk freely without the imposition of the centre's values. In this place, they question the roles forced on them by Gilead society, Moira reveals her plan for escape (HT 84-85), and eventually, Moira carries out her plan, using the washroom stall as a diversion to attack Aunt Elizabeth and steal her Aunt habit (HT 122). It is clear that in Atwood's

novel, the washroom stall in the Red Centre offers the Handmaids a place of shelter from the mandates of Gilead.

In addition to her own room and the Red Centre washrooms, Offred finds another enclosed space that gives her relief from the restrictions of Gilead. Nick's room, within the Commander's house, is a place where Offred and Nick meet for illicit sexual rendezvous. Although their initial encounter is arranged by Serena Joy in an attempt to ensure Offred's pregnancy, Offred and Nick continue the affair, which contradicts all of the official conventions of Gilead society. The narrator describes Nick's room:

Being here with him is safety; it's a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside. This is a delusion, of course. This room is one of the most dangerous places I could be. If I were caught there would be no quarter, but I'm beyond caring. And how have I come to trust him like this, which is foolhardy in itself? (HT 253)

Despite Offred's valid concerns, it is evident that she has found a place where she can share intimacy, love, and trust with another person. In Nick's room, she can literally shed the Handmaid's habit, and break out of her proscribed role. She tells him her real name and of her past; in that way she feels "known," independent of the label of Handmaid (HT 254). That fact that the room could be a dangerous place reinforces the sense that what happens there is contradictory to the rules of the centre; however, Offred first describes it in terms of enclosure and shelter, thus demonstrating that in its protected isolation, Nick's room represents an opposition to the boundaries

of the Gilead Republic.

Even more than places of private enclosure, marginal landscapes also stand opposed to the restrictive boundaries imposed by the centre, as Atwood demonstrates in her depiction of the Colonies and Canada in *The Handmaid's Tale*. As mentioned previously, the Colonies are places outside the enclosed city that is the heart of Gilead, where people who refuse to conform to Gilead's strict gender roles are sent. Offred also notes that sometimes people even choose certain death in the Colonies rather than conform to false roles that are the opposite of their ideals. For example, many young nuns refuse to convert to the role of Handmaid, as that forces them to relinquish the vow of celibacy they have taken in dedication of their Catholic religion (HT 207). The Colonies, therefore, house brave people who reject the gender roles set out for them by the elite of Gilead. Even though they are meant to be places of punishment, in fact they represent places of bittersweet victory. Although Gilead forces the prisoners of The Colonies to wear long grey robes, labels them "Unwomen," and makes them do hard and dangerous labour, Gilead fails to rob these people of their self-created identities that they feel are worth dying for.

A more optimistic marginal land that Atwood presents in contrast to the bounds of Gilead is Canada. Canada is portrayed as a place of freedom from Gilead's rigid gender restrictions, that lies beyond the centre's borders. Offred's first allusion to Canada is in reference to a news broadcast where it is

reported that an "espionage ring" composed of members of "the heretical sect of Quakers" had been arrested for "smuggling precious national resources over the border into Canada" (HT 79). Later Moira's recollection of her escape attempt reveals that the precious resources are, in fact, potential Handmaids, who make their way to freedom in Canada on the "Underground Femaleroad" (231). By borrowing from the term "Underground Railroad," Atwood makes a connection between the enslavement of African Americans in the pre-civil war United States, and the enslavement of women, particularly Handmaids, in the futuristic Gilead. In both cases, Canada is a marginal space, beyond the boundaries that enforce slavery, where an individual can create an authentic self-identity that is not dependent on strict, imposed social roles.

Atwood herself comments on the use of Canada as a marginal land in an interview with Bonnie Lyons:

"I set *The Handmaid's Tale* in the States because I couldn't fly it in Canada. In other words, I tried all kinds of possibilities. Could this happen in Montreal or Toronto? And none of them felt right. Because it's not a Canadian sort of thing to do. Canadians might do it after the States did it, in some sort of watered-down version. . .⁶⁷

Interestingly, Atwood views Canada as a place of alternatives, as the defection of Handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests. Perhaps then, in her depiction of Canada as a potential haven from narrow views of gender roles, Atwood encourages Canadians to make their country a place where multiplicity of roles in gender

⁶⁷Bonnie Lyons, "Using Other People's Dreadful Childhoods," *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* ed. Earl Ingersoll (London: Virago, 1992) 223.

as well as ethnicity can flourish.

Like Atwood, Gibson draws on historical marginal places that allow racial equality as models for marginal spaces that subvert rigid gender roles. The Zion Cluster is a prime example of such a marginal space. The construction of the Zion Cluster is, in the history of the novel's universe, an act of rebellion against Sprawl values:

Zion had been founded by five workers who'd refused to return, who'd turned their backs on the well and started building. They'd suffered calcium loss and heart shrinkage before the rotational gravity was established in the colony's central torus. Seen from the bubble of the taxi, Zion's makeshift hull reminded Case of the patchwork tenements of Istanbul, the irregular, discolored plates laser-scrawled with Rastafarian symbols and initials of welders. (N 103)

Within the Rastafarian community of Zion, a population modelled on a real counter-culture to white western society, the psychic boundaries that are in force within the confines of the Sprawl do not apply. For example, Aerol, one of the colonists who helps Molly and Case, tells Case that he has given birth:

Aerol, with no particular provocation, related the tale of the baby who had burst from his forehead and scampered into a forest of hydroponic ganja. "Ver' small baby, mon, no long' you finga." (N 106)

Here, Aerol breaks the gender roles of Sprawl society and our own, for in The Sprawl, offspring are biological products born in tanks, while in our own society only females can give birth. Although Molly explains that it was not a physical reality, it is still a real experience for Aerol:

"It's the ganga. . . They don't make much of a difference between states, you know? Aerol tells you

it happened, well, it happened to *him*. It's not like bullshit, more like poetry." (N 106)

Aerol's refusal to distinguish between states of mind, a value of the Zion cluster, is associated with the blurring of boundaries between strict gender roles. Since the Zionites do not separate their ganja visions from more earthly experiences, it is possible for a man to give birth to an infant, and thus, it is possible for Sprawl gender mandates to be subverted.

Moreover, people of Zion continue to subvert Sprawl values by ignoring the incitations for extreme competition. For example, Aerol's companion Maelcum prioritizes loyalty over self-interest when he joins Case's team, and risks his own life to help Case complete the mission (N 192). Maelcum is not motivated by masculinist values that prize material profit; instead, he is touched by Case's own decision to not abandon Molly at the point of no return on her infiltration of Villa Straylight. Just as The Colonies and Canada are marginal places for the subversion of gender roles and the values that encourage them, so is the Zion cluster.

Like Gibson and Atwood, Vonarburg uses marginal landscapes in *In The Mother's Land* as metaphors for the subversion of rigid gender roles. The fact that men, as the subordinate sex group, are sent to "Farms" outside of the city centres mirrors the limited role they have in the Maerlande power structure. However, this negative physical isolation of men from the cities is countered by Lisbei's archaeological venture to Belmont, a site far beyond the confines of civic enclosures, where she enrolls

men as "full partnas" on the excavation. At the Belmont site, men and women work on the dig as equals; some of their fireside chats, and the sobering memorial for Dougall help the women to see the men's discontent about the unfairly limited role they have in Maerlande society. These discussions lead to some suggestions for possible social reforms, such as the inclusion of men in The Games, that would expand men's positions in society (ML 343-345). Clearly, although marginal landscapes mirror the marginal position of men in Maerlande, they also provide a place where rigid Maerlande gender roles can be subverted.

In addition to the countryside of Maerlande, another marginal space is "The Badlands," which exists outside of the boundaries of Maerlande. Supposedly, the Badlands are toxic, and exposure to that environment can lead to genetic deformities. Thus, as was recounted in an earlier chapter, Loi ventures into the Badlands to ensure that she will receive a hysterectomy, since she has already given birth to a number of infants who did not survive (ML 70). For Loi, the Badlands are a place of rebellion where she can subvert the role of childbearer required of her by her society.

The Badlands serve a similar purpose for Lisbei. When Lisbei discovers that she is pregnant, after it was assumed that she was infertile, Lisbei realizes that the child would not be accepted by Maerlande society:

Then it flashed upon her. *Nemdotta*. The childe would be outside the Lines. The fact that Toller had falsely declared himself a Blue would come out . . . and if Lisbei, suddenly a Red, had procreated with him after

she'd been in the badlands, even fairly unpolluted badlands, they'd both be outlaws, renegadas. They would be sterilized and exiled. And the childe . . . if she lived to be born--born alive, born normal--and if she survived . . . she would be a nemdotta. (ML 462)

The childe that Lisbei has conceived is outside the Family Lines, boundaries placed on Maerlande procreation to ensure a healthy gene pool. It is clear that Lisbei's childe, if born, would be an outcast, a "nemdotta," because the circumstances of her birth do not meet with the strict gender roles of parenthood laid down by Maerlande society.

Since it is clear that Lisbei cannot acknowledge her pregnancy in Maerlande, yet she still wishes to give birth, Kelys takes Lisbei into the Badlands to hide her pregnancy and give birth. For Lisbei, the marginal spaces of the Badlands offer protection, and a place for her to undermine the strict gender role placed on her by Maerlande rules. Vonarburg writes,

Lisbei would always look back with pleasure and occasional nostalgia on the eight months spent with Kelys in the Badlands--in Kelys's "quiet spot" north of Bethely. Seven klms beyond the blue stones, on top of a range of low hills, a large cabin stood beside a stream in a flat clearing surrounded by trees. (ML 464)

Contrary to early depictions of the Badlands as a wasteland in which only death is possible, this picture of Kelys's quiet spot shows a private place outside the confines of the Maerlande borders and its limited gender roles, where new life is born.

In fact, Lisbei likens the child growing within her to the landscape. During taiche practise, Lisbei thinks,

. . . the babie itself seemed to be a miniature landscape, unfinished but already possessing its own

luminescence, the contours raised by the movement of transformation, determined to become, never still. (ML 469)

Instead of the controlled and stagnant social roles that are enforced in the enclosures of Maerlande, the Badlands offer a place where evolution is possible. Lisbei's childe Yemen is adopted by Tula, and one of Yemen's children eventually becomes Capta of Bethely (ML 481). With the influence of Lisbei and her descendents, many reforms that create multiple gender roles for everyone come into Maerlande society, such as "men in Assemblies" (ML 482). Due to Lisbei's influence, many innovations happen in Maerlande that help them to grow, and to discover new things and ways to be (ML 482). Thus, the potential for growth represented by the Badlands is brought to the enclosure of Maerlande, thereby subverting the static social expectations forced on Maerlande citizens.

Interestingly, it is revealed that the mysterious figure Kelys is from a secret and enclosed society that is hidden in the Badlands (ML 481-497). In Kelys's society, from which Garde also emerged, individuals can switch gender at will, possess psychic empathy with others, and have great regenerative capabilities that prolong their lives. Kelys breaks their rigid rules of isolation to discover if rumours of genetic mutation on the "outside" are true, and secretly adds her own genetic material to Maerlande's gene pool:

I began to hope [that Yemen would have the same potential for gender switching]. Hope that my sin had been remitted, as some of you would say. But could I have foreseen such a genetic drift on the Exterior, to

the point where the systematic introduction of my genes would have this effect? . . . The mutation was supposed to have *disappeared* from the Exterior, if you were to be believed! If we'd believed Garde when she told us the opposite . . . (ML 486)

Kelys is Lisbei's biological father, and takes various identities during her decades in Maerlande. Kelys enters the "Exterior" much as Lisbei enters the Badlands. Both use marginal spaces to subvert the centre's stagnant thinking and rigid rules that inhibit potentially varied gender roles.

Clearly all three authors, Atwood, Gibson, and Vonarburg, use landscape to reflect the enforcement and the subsequent subversions of rigid gender roles. All three novels show an urban centre as the source of strict gender roles; however, isolated pockets of resistance exist within the bounds of the centre that undermine the values associated with the rigid definitions of gender. Finally, marginal spaces outside the borders of the centre provide environments where multiple gender roles and individual growth are possible. The various landscapes in all three novels are important metaphors that are fundamental for understanding Atwood's, Gibson's, and Vonarburg's depictions of gender restrictions and reconstructions.

Chapter 5

Storytelling as Gender Role Subversion

Although William Gibson, Margaret Atwood, and Elizabeth Vonarburg all portray dystopic societies where gender roles are rigidly defined, they are not so pessimistic as to suggest that such rigidity is necessary in thinking about gender. Clearly, in using the utopian genre, these authors hope to identify problems regarding gender stereotypes that exist in our own Canadian society. However, all three do more than identify problems; through the act of writing they subvert the stifling gender roles they criticize. Gibson, Atwood, and Vonarburg demonstrate how storytelling is a powerful tool in changing rigid thinking, and in encouraging socially unsanctioned gender roles; the authors show these aspects of storytelling by having characters within their own novels use storytelling and unique narratives to oppose strict gender roles. Thus, the characters mirror the authors in the way they use the telling of tales to influence the acceptance of alternative concepts of gender. First, the authors give us the motif of storytelling to indicate the intent of their own narratives. In bringing this motif to the reader's attention, the authors emphasize their own subversive storytelling techniques and images, such as manipulating and varying archetypal patterns, as well as creating new images, of which the cyborg image is the most powerful. Ultimately, content and style merge in *Neuromancer*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *In The*

Mother's Land, for the purpose of questioning traditional definitions of gender, and suggesting new possibilities for gender configurations.

The storytelling motif is the crux for these questions and suggestions. Storytelling is definitely a mode of subversion in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred's narrative reveals that even at the beginning of her Handmaid experience in the Red Centre, telling tales is a form of subversion. She says:

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semidarkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed:

Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June. (HT 4)

The stories the women tell, their names, are short but carry infinite meaning about their identities. By keeping their true names alive, the Handmaids-to-be secretly resist the practice of taking the variation of their Commanders' names that identify the Handmaids as property.

The secret sharing of names is connected with other subversive storytelling in the novel. For example, on the Birth Day, Offred exchanges a few stolen words with the woman next to her. The woman asks Offred's real name, and even though the narrator does not get a chance to tell her, she acknowledges the importance of sharing stories:

I want to tell her my name, but Aunt Elizabeth raises her head, staring around the room, she must have heard a break in the chant, so there's no more time. Sometimes you can find things out, on Birth Days. (HT 117)

Again, it is clear that the Handmaids use whatever opportunities they can to subvert Gilead doctrines in the best way that they can, that is, by the illicit telling of tales that resist the official religious and political propaganda. Again, since they usually have relatively little time, the Handmaids must compress the tales into the most relevant and meaningful messages given the few breaks in Gilead's constant surveillance of them. The most relevant messages are the individual identities that Gilead society refuses to recognize. Although the stories represented by the telling of names are short, they act as impediments to the total control the top-ranking officials wish to have over the way people, particularly women, define themselves.

Thus, when Offred defines herself in the terms of her love affair with Nick, she tells tales to him: "I talk too much. I tell him things I shouldn't. I tell him about Moira, about Ofglen. . . I tell him my real name. . ." (HT 253-254). Her stories are linked to her subversive actions. She tells him things that are forbidden within Gilead society. She subverts the role defined for her as sole property of the Commander by having the affair with Nick in the first place. She subverts the authority of the Commander's Wife by continuing the affair, for love's sake rather than the need to procreate. These rebellious actions stem from the maintenance of most of her own true identity, which is preserved in the affirmation of her own true name.

Of course, Offred's major act of subversive storytelling is

in the creation of her narrated account of her life as a Handmaid. Since writing materials are forbidden in Gilead (HT 130), at the safehouse, Offred records her story on an audio cassette (HT 283-284). Within her own narrative, Offred can offer alternative versions to the official history written exclusively by the male Commanders. In her oral account, the narrator gives us hidden fragments and possibilities. In imagining what might have been her husband Luke's fate Offred gives us a number of versions that she can envision (HT 98-100). She also includes other people's stories within her own; thus, she describes alternatives to blind conformity to the Handmaid role when she relates Moira's tale (HT 228-234), and the fate of the original Ofglen revealed by her successor (HT 267). In opposition to the rigid roles and denial of the past presented by Gilead in religious litanies and the forbidding of the written word, Offred refuses to keep silent, even if her story must be kept secret. The tales that she gives are open-ended, not complete, but leaving room for ambiguity and growth, something which the strict codes of Gilead denounce.

Thus, in contrast to the lip service she gives to Gilead's dogma, Offred's narrative is thoughtful, and is typical of postmodern self-reflectiveness.⁶⁸ She constantly brings

⁶⁸ Linda Hutcheon describes elements of Canadian postmodern literature:

In their self-reflexivity, Canadian postmodern novels offer yet another example of the self-conscious or "meta-" sensibility of our times, that is, of the awareness that all our systems of understanding are deliberate and historically specific human constructs (not natural and eternal givens), with all the limitations and strengths which that definition entails. These are novels that admit openly they are fiction, but suggest that fiction is just another means by which we make sense

attention to her role as storyteller, a powerful role that contradicts the powerlessness she has in her Handmaid role. She says, "I don't want to be telling this story" (HT 257) and "I am trying not to tell stories" (HT 47), but these comments simply emphasize the act of telling. And, in fact, she must tell these stories, for, as Larry Caldwell observes,

Offred seeks through circumspection and interiority to oppose to this anti-history dynamic a continuous narrative (re)creation.

. . . Atwood sees that people and societies as a matter of course invent themselves through storytelling processes that never actually end.⁶⁹

Thus, telling her Handmaid's Tale is an act of empowerment, for it demonstrates her fight against a one-dimensional role imposed on her by Gilead. She says, "By telling you at all, I'm at least believing in you. . ." (HT 251). Not only does she believe in an audience, but also that her tale is worthy of note, and that her identity, all of her self that was represented by "her shining name," is worthy of recognition. Offred follows her predecessor's scribbled message of rebellion, "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" ("Don't let the bastards grind you down") (HT 175), by passing on her own story and the stories of others. Despite the attempt by Gilead to limit Offred, she keeps alive the fragments of past, and pieces of her present, that make

of our world (past and present) and that, as such, it is comparable to historiography, philosophy, physics, sociology, and so on. Preface, *The Canadian Postmodern, A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988) x.

⁶⁹ Larry Caldwell, "Wells, Orwell, and Atwood: (EPI)Logic and Eu/Utopia." *Extrapolation* 33.4 (1992) 340.

up stories that Gilead tries to erase from recorded history.

Offred's attempt to keep these stories alive is validated, at least in part, by the "Historical Notes" that follow her story. In Atwood's epilogue, a transcription of Offred's oral recollections is the focus of an academic conference, which provides a new context for Offred's story. The reader discovers, through this framing device, that the Republic of Gilead does not survive; rather than remaining a nightmarish future for the reader, Gilead is transformed into a strange historical episode that fascinates twenty-second century scholars. Certainly, much of Offred's story survives to be heard by future generations. However, Atwood's portrayal of the academic presentation encourages the reader to question how much of Gilead's rigid patriarchy has been abolished, and how much still exists in this far future, in more subtle, and perhaps more dangerous forms.

The epilogue's first speaker is Maryann Crescent Moon. For Atwood, as for her character Offred, a name tells a story; so "Maryann Crescent Moon" reveals much to the reader about this post-Gileadean society. First, this initial speaker is identified by the traditional given name "Maryann" as a woman, an identity denied to Offred in Gilead; also, her last name suggests she is of First Nations heritage; thus, she is an individual who would have been doubly persecuted and oppressed by the patriarchy of Gilead. In contrast to the potential powerlessness she would have experienced in Gilead, in the context of the epilogue, Maryann Crescent Moon is in a position of authority; not

only is she free of the household prison, she is the "chair" of the "Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies." In addition, she is a professor at the University of Denay, Nunavit ("Deny...none-of-it"),⁷⁰ showing that she holds authority outside of the conference. Maryann Crescent Moon's authority is also reflected in her name, for traditionally the moon has been a symbol for female power in world mythologies, and has been associated with cyclical rather than linear time.⁷¹ Her presence indicates that post-Gileadean society is more flexible than Gilead in defining gender (and racial) roles.

However, Atwood makes it clear that the world of "Nunavit" is far from a eutopia for self-defining gender roles, although it is preferable to Gilead. For example, Maryann Crescent Moon's actual comments at the conference sound more like they come from a social convenor than an academic. Her announcements of a "fishing expedition," a "Nature Walk," and "Outdoor Period-Costume Sing-Song," (HT 281) take precedence over the introduction to and lecture about Offred's journal. This glib attitude towards Offred's message, particularly the encouragement of adopting period dress, undermines the content of Offred's journal, and in connection, Crescent Moon's own position of authority. As her symbolic name suggests, *Crescent Moon* does not represent the full potential for female empowerment.

⁷⁰ Murphy, 34.

⁷¹ *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, ed. Barbara Walker (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983) 669-673.

Maryann Crescent Moon is not the only one to undermine the female struggle for freedom from Gilead's gender restrictions. The keynote speaker, Professor James Darcy Piexoto, from Cambridge University, England, also discounts Offred's story with his offhand attitude, despite his title as "expert" on the subject (HT 281). It is important to note that Piexoto is from a university recognized in our own time as one of the most prestigious higher learning institutions in the world, as well as one most rooted in traditional patriarchal values.⁷² By placing Piexoto in the role of a Cambridge scholar, Atwood hints that his interpretation and re-creation of Offred's narrative may not be the truest to Offred's intention, despite his designation as "expert." Interpreting Atwood's foreshadowing in this way is justified by Piexoto's discussion of Offred's journal. His early remarks make light of Offred's oppression because of gender roles:

Strictly speaking, it was not a manuscript at all when first discovered, and bore no title. The superscription "The Handmaid's Tale" was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in honour of the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who know Professor Wade, as I do, will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*, that being to some extent, the bone of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (*Laughter, applause.*) (HT 283)

⁷² Cambridge was established in 1209 A.D., during the middle ages when views about women and education seem to correspond with the feudal values propounded by Gileadean society. Women were excluded from learning at Cambridge until 1869 with the founding of the university's first women's college; even so, the women were still segregated from the men until the mid-nineteen sixties when a number of co-educational colleges were formed. *Collier's Encyclopedia* ed. Louis Shores, PhD., et al. (New York: Macmillan Educational Corporation, 1976) 194-195.

First, it is vital to note that the title of Offred's story is given by the two Cambridge professors. Again, men are defining Offred because of her gender, and the role they subscribe to her. They choose the title in honour of the medieval writer Chaucer, who has nothing to do with Offred, instead of honouring the author herself. Moreover, the puns made by Piexoto and Wade in the title and the lecture emphasize the Gileadean definition of Offred as a piece of meat rather than *her* self-definition as human that she creates in her narrative.

These comments are not the only ones made by Piexoto that undermine Offred's story. He tells the conference that he "hesitate[s] to use the word *document*" in reference to Offred's journal, preferring the derogatory term "item" which seems to discredit its validity. Piexoto also describes at great length how he and his partner transcribed and ordered Offred's story (HT 283-284), as well as their quest to identify Offred's Commander (288-292). Patrick Murphy comments on Piexoto's remarks:

. . . Atwood's historian behaves as if patriarchy has disappeared because he and everyone else is self-consciously non-sexist and certainly not reactionary like the Gileadeans. Yet a longer portion of his talk is given over to first promoting his own archaeological accomplishments and second to discussing the probable identity of the commander in whose house the handmaid lived. The academic, that is, still attempts to analyze history on the basis of male biography, and thereby mutes the woman's voice.⁷³

Through Piexoto, Atwood may well be making fun of "post-feminism." Once more, Atwood gives us a speaker who self-

⁷³Murphy, 35.

consciously puts together a story. However, Piexoto's effort works to deny Offred's experience, under the pretense of making it more comprehensible.

Piexoto and Offred contrast each other in the stories they tell and how they tell them. Linda Hutcheon comments that Piexoto's criticism of the content of Offred's journal is unfair, for "she did [have the instincts of a reporter], but what she has told us is not the kind of information the male historian wants: she has told us about women's history, a history either ignored or trivialized by the academic tradition."⁷⁴ Offred's oral tale tries to include a number of alternative stories and present them in a non-linear but perhaps more psychologically coherent form; Piexoto's transcription of her story captures it in written form, both ordering it chronologically and negating important elements of her story, such as her tone of voice and the rock music that frames her taped narrative (HT 284). Piexoto wants to place the transcribed story in a small spot in the master framework of historical documentation, which is a form that is typically written from a male-dominated perspective. Offred's intention is to describe the places and attitudes that exist outside of the master framework, giving multiple, if incomplete views. As Ketterer observes, Piexoto embodies "the smug blindness of a society that refuses to recognize. . . the seeds of sexism that could lead to another Gilead."⁷⁵ Piexoto cannot see that his

⁷⁴Hutcheon, 18.

⁷⁵Ketterer, "Contextual Dystopia," 214.

story does as much to negate Offred's story as did Gileadean society.

In drawing attention to the way that both Piexoto and Offred construct their tales, Atwood brings attention to her own subversive methods and intentions in writing this novel. First, her paradoxical adoption of a "pseudo-documentary frame" for a work of futuristic fiction calls into question the impartial- and factual-sounding voices adopted by contemporary historians and literary critics. Atwood shows how every story, whether it is based on historical events or on the imagination, is re-constructed by its author, according to a personal, if not always conscious, agenda. In Atwood's presentation, Offred's fragmented, open-ended narrative appears more authentic and truthful than Piexoto's attempt to portray a whole, closed "chunk" of history. It becomes clear that Piexoto's method will never uncover every important element of the Gileadean era, especially when he refuses to acknowledge pieces of information from people like Offred, whose testaments do not fit into the reconstruction he wants to create. Atwood reminds her readers that the most truthful reconstructions do not attempt to close at the end; Offred's story does not have a clear ending because the problems she faced, that is other people forcing their gender definitions onto her identity, still exist. Piexoto's smug assurance that the strict gender stereotypes no longer exist, despite his own demonstration of chauvinistic words and attitudes, shows Atwood's readers that their own self-

satisfaction about liberal gender roles masks just as many similar attitudes. Atwood "provides the opportunity for dystopian analogical linkages between future and present by listing conference papers that compare the Gileadean society of the tale with Nazism and Khomeni's theocratic fascism"⁷⁶: thus Atwood attempts to shake her readers' complacency with warnings that the present multiplicity of gender roles has not reached its limits, and might face types of opposition that many believe have long been overcome.

In her novel, *In The Mother's Land*, Vonarburg uses methods similar to Atwood's for similar purposes. Emphasis is given to Lisbei's fascination with stories and her own storytelling gifts, through recollections of her storymaking with Tula, excerpts from her journal and letters, and her academic studies of ancient manuscripts. Fragments of other people's stories are included in the account of Lisbei's life, including the stories of Loi, Dougall, Selva, Toller, Guisea, and Halde. The revelation at the end of the novel that Kelys, one of the mysterious figures in Lisbei's life, is the narrator of the novel, and that the collections of stories she shares is a report to her people in the Badlands, creates a frame similar to the "Historical Notes" in *The Handmaid's Tale*, putting Lisbei's story in a new context. Like Atwood, Vonarburg showcases the storytelling of her characters to draw attention to her own storytelling techniques, and their relation to matters of gender roles in the readers'

⁷⁶Murphy, 34.

world.

Storytelling plays an important role in Vonarburg's novel from the beginning. Through Lisbei's experience, Vonarburg contrasts the closed, "official" stories advocated by most of the gardianas, with the vital, interactive stories told by Moorei. Lisbei knows not to ask questions of most of the gardianas. The narrator says,

But one doesn't ask questions in the garderie. Lisbei had learned, better and faster than any other mosta, to sense the currents of good will or reserve in the gardianas, and she submitted to the tacit law of this small world: *You don't ask the gardianas questions: you wait for them to do the asking.* (ML 6)

Moorei is different from the other gardianas: "Moorei, before being Moorei, had been the gardiana who answers" (ML 9). Moorei's stories are also different from those of the other gardianas, for they do not quash questioning; instead, Moorei's stories challenge Lisbei and the other mostas to brainstorm new ideas and tell stories of their own. Thus, when Lisbei asks "What were you, before being a babie?" (ML 10), Moorei responds by asking "What do you think you could be?" (ML 10). Moorei lets Lisbei think of some possible answers, and suggests new directions of thought for Lisbei by giving her analogies. For example, Moorei tells Lisbei about how plants procreate:

You take a seed for a plant, a tiny, tiny seed and you put it in the ground. The earth nourishes it and the seeds get bigger and bigger until it sticks up out of the earth and becomes a plant. . . . When the plant is big enough, it makes seeds too. You see, Lisbei, the apple does the same thing with its seeds. (ML 11)

In having Moorei tell Lisbei something about procreation that

garderie etiquette will not allow the mosta to know, Vonarburg sets the stage for the directions Lisbei's own storytelling will take, as well as her own purposes in telling stories that challenge the status quo and rigid thinking about gender.

Vonarburg's purposes become clearer when Lisbei becomes inspired by Moorei's interactive storytelling to tell tales of her own. The narrator says, ". . . Lisbei ran to Tula. She had a new story to tell" (ML 12). Storytelling is an important part of the relationship between Tula and Lisbei, and as it is for the people in Atwood's novel, often represents subversion of hierarchical rules. Lisbei's relationship with Tula is discouraged by others, but that relationship is made stronger by storytelling: "What a delightful game for Lisbei to watch ideas fluttering around through her head like coloured butterflies to be caught and put together to make a story-- like a quilt-- For Tula! But this story raised ever more difficult questions as it unfolded" (ML 12). Together, the two mostas question aspects of procreation that those in power do not want them to know about; moreover, they come up with their own answers to difficult questions. Like Offred in Atwood's novel, Lisbei and Tula reconstruct the tales given to them by Moorei, using their own experience, to create their own stories. They challenge the official versions of stories by filling in the gaps left by the other gardianas. In developing their talents for storytelling, the two mostas also develop a new, more flexible way of thinking. Instead of accepting only one point of view that comes from those

in power, Lisbei and Tula learn to recognize the possibility of other views that might conflict with the propaganda of the matriarchal hierarchy of Maerlande.

As in Atwood's novel, oral tales become modes of rebellion against and subversion of rigid gender roles. This rebellion against rigid gender codes is particularly evident early on in the novel when the mostas discuss procreation and how that relates to the physical differences between the sexes. Although the girls insist that the boys are useless since males do not carry and give birth to children, the boys offer an alternative version of the story that finds a significant role for males (ML 33-35). After the discussion turns into a teasing match, Lisbei later questions her own "meanness" in trying to impose her version of the story on the boys: "But if every story had another side, how could you know who was right? Everyone couldn't be right at once could they?" (ML 35). Tula's answer, "Why not?" (ML 35) sets the stage for alternative visions of gender expressed through oral tales, which Lisbei explores throughout her life experiences.

Lisbei hears and tells many stories that challenge the rigidly defined gender roles of Maerlande; like Offred, she collects fragments, and shades them with her own experience to demonstrate the injustice of limited gender roles, and the possible liberation for everyone that a multiplicity of gender roles might provide. Selva's telling of Loi's suicide demonstrates the injustice and waste that comes from defining a

person on the sole grounds of fertility (ML 70-71). Similarly, the "dolore" at Dougall's memorial service shows how restricted gender roles, and the expectations based on those roles, made Dougall's life a misery. However, in the case of Dougall's "dolore," the necessity of multiple views is emphasized by the fact that each person present is invited to share a memory of Dougall:

One after another, the voices pierced the flickering darkness around the flames. Nameless, faceless voices, the voices of men floating up into the night. After a while, despite the stupor of grief, Lisbei realized this couldn't be just Dougall they were talking about.

. . . Dougall, not Dougall, perhaps Dougall-- but they were all talking about Dougall just the same, just as it was Dougall whom Lisbei saw when she thought of Garrec. (ML 340-341)

Each person has a different view of Dougall, and each person's image of Dougall is shaded by personal experience. It becomes clear that, while each tale does show something of Dougall, his true essence, how he defined himself, can never be totally captured. However, the stories make clear that Dougall, like Loi, is much more than the gender role imposed on him by Maerlande traditions.

In addition to the variety of first-hand accounts that Lisbei hears, older oral tales play an important role in her life and her explorations of alternatives to Maerlande's strict gender codes. For example, the ancient story about Garde, proclaimed a saviour by Maerlande's religion, is a source of fascination for Lisbei. At first, Lisbei encounters Garde as the subject of parables told to her during her "childhood." However, Garde

becomes a more complex personage after Lisbei's discovery of Halde's journal, a document that contradicts some of the traditional stories about Garde, while also putting new perspectives on previously ignored details in the story. The revelation of the document's contents poses a problem, for it places one of the most fervent religious groups in an unpleasant light:

[Today's Juddites] would definitely not be pleased to learn that the Juddites of old had fought against Garde. That some of their number must have lied about the tradition, falsified both History and legend. The position of present-day Juddites, entrenched in their strict fidelity to the Word, intractable guardians of tradition, would not emerge unscathed from such a revelation. (ML 142)

However, to Lisbei, the most important revelation of Halde's journal is that "'Garde really died and came to life again in Bethely'" (ML 143). Lisbei sees the document as confirming something that historians discounted simply as legend. In Halde's testimony, the fact that Garde is resurrected is more significant than the consequences to be faced by the religious institutions of Maerlande.

Lisbei also faces opposition from those who doubt the authenticity of the journal because it is a written testimony of only one person. Selva and Moorei do not completely accept Halde's notebook as "evidence" of Garde's resurrection. Moorei reminds Lisbei, "It's not true simply because it's written down, Lisbei. . . I thought I'd taught you that History is not a science. It depends too much on human testimony" (ML 143). However, Lisbei uses Halde's comments as a corroboration of facts

mentioned in the official version of Garde's miraculous survival. The comments point to a truth that has been ignored, that is that there is more to Garde's resurrection than the official accounts acknowledge.

Vonarburg through her character, Lisbei, demonstrates that much can be learned from paying attention to alternate versions of stories. For Lisbei, the story of Garde is appealing "because it blended History and legend rather than setting them against one another, as happened all too often" (ML 140). Lisbei acknowledges that legends can shed light on factual incidents, providing a variety of perspectives on events. Lisbei's intuition tells her, "legend could be true, story could be History" (ML 141). This intuition leads Lisbei to research variations of popular folk tales, including some older versions found in Halde's notebook. Unlike the Historian in Atwood's "Historical Notes," Lisbei is eager to listen to a variety of voices from the past, and acknowledge each as a truth even if it contradicts popular opinions. As a consequence, Lisbei's attitude towards History and legend erases the boundaries between the two, leading her to discoveries missed by others. These previously overlooked ideas and artifacts draw Lisbei closer to a world view where gender is less relevant.

This blurring of boundaries between History and legend is most evident in Lisbei's study of variations of traditional folk tales, particularly the "Pimpernella cycle" of which an ancient version is found in Halde's Notebook. "The Pimpernella Cycle"

is the subject of a class discussion during Lisbei's education at the Wardenburg Schole. Edwina the Tutress sees the tales as representing wish-fulfilments of slave-women during the patriarchal and tyrannical "Harem Period":

"Take the archaic Pimpernella Cycle of tales, with their continual transformations of girls into boys. This confirms the fact that the low percentage of male births has been a constant factor since the Decline. The Harem women adopted the tales and added to them, because being a woman was a terrible thing then, and many women must have dreamed of being men instead. The Hive women took over the tales and in turn reversed the sexual roles, just as they did so with so many other things. Pimpernella changes from a boy to a girl--" (ML 203-204).

Edwina sees the tales as having "'settled into a definite form [that] won't change'" (ML 204). For her, the legends are relics from the past, useful only in establishing dates for archaeological artifacts, and perhaps as clues to the mind set of ancient people. For Lisbei, however, the cycles offer that and more, for to her they are living stories. Since the Pimpernella stories have meaning for her, Lisbei studies them further, finally discovering "twelve correlations" that describe the locale of Pimpernella's hiding place (ML 307). With the help of her friends, Lisbei is able to identify a physical site that corresponds to the physical descriptions in the legends. Lisbei's unconventional pinpointing of the potential dig site is discredited by established experts and scholars of the Wardenburg Exploration and Recuperation Funding Committee; Lisbei must turn to the respected Kelys for help in getting funding for the project. Moreover, because Lisbei has few resources to attract

other Blue female recuperatas to help excavate, she takes Kelys's advice to enroll blue men as "partnas" or partners, rather than as lowly "hirelings." As Vonarburg orchestrates it, Lisbei's interpretation of the Pimpernella tales directly results in the erosion of Maerlande's rigid hierarchy of gender roles.

However, the Pimpernella cycle offers more than clues for Lisbei's archaeological project. Vonarburg uses these tales within a tale to give the readers clues about the true nature of the characters in her novel. Lisbei's study finds various versions of these stories, such as "The Hundred Armed Giantess" and "The Princess and the Spirit," where the gender switching and recuperative powers of the protagonists are emphasized. Lisbei, in her journal entries, makes connections between these tales and her own experience with the deadly Malady and subsequent speedy recoveries; she postulates that perhaps the Malady existed before Maerlande physicians discovered it, and that it was and is a key factor in the development of special mutations (ML 210-213). However, Lisbei does not fill in all of the gaps.

For the readers, it is an inescapable fact that the sexual transformations made by Pimpernella and her children mirror Lisbei's own mutability in sexual orientation, as her relationships with Tula, Toller, and Guiseia illustrate. All of these characters share the telepathic sensitivity that seems to be slowly becoming more prevalent throughout Maerlande; it is this awakening consciousness which is important in the various

configurations of sexual relationships that occur. When they are young, sisters Lisbei and Tula are each other's first love and lover; they discuss creating children together (ML 463). A parallel relationship exists between the twins Toller and Guiseia who, in fact, do create a forbidden child, Sylvane (ML 385-385). Lisbei has sexual relationships with both Guiseia and Toller, separately and together. It is important to note that their night of *ménage-à-trois* lovemaking results in the surprise and forbidden conception of Lisbei's child, Yemen, despite the fact that Lisbei displayed all the signs of being infertile.⁷⁷ Lisbei and Tula's youthful dream of jointly parenting a child comes true when Tula acknowledges Yemen as her own to save the child from being named a "nemdotta," or outcast.

The blurring of rigid sexual boundaries, which Vonarburg expresses in the breaking of taboos belonging to both contemporary Euro-American society, in the incestual and homosexual relationships, and the fictional world of Maerlande, in the incestual and the heterosexual relationships, is necessary, according to Vonarburg, for both personal and social growth. The fact that Lisbei recognizes the irrelevance of gender when it comes to a person's potential for attaining

⁷⁷ It is probable that Vonarburg is responding to the parallel situation in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which Offred, The Commander, and The Wife engage in a similar sexual act in the hopes of Offred conceiving. The irony of the situations is clear; Offred despite her "viable ovaries" does not become pregnant because of the Commander's sterility, while Lisbei accidentally becomes pregnant which reveals that both she and Toller are fertile. In both situations, what determines if there is conception is the state of the relationships. Lisbei loves both Toller and Guiseia, and therefore a child is created. In contrast, Offred cannot love or even like the Commander and his Wife, and thus, she, like their relationship, remains barren.

professional goals, or for love, is embodied in that liason with Toller and Guiseia. As twins, Toller and Guiseia literally began as one person, although they later split into two people of different genders. They share the same intellectual capabilities and passions, as well as the telepathic empathy that Lisbei labels "the light." The only difference between them is how society judges them because of their sex. When Lisbei gets over her own preconceptions about prescribed gender roles, she is able to share her love with both twins, and a "miracle" occurs in that her hidden fertility is unveiled. Yemen, the product of Lisbei's liaison with the Angresea twins, gives birth to a child who, it is revealed in the epilogue, becomes a progressive leader as the Bethely Mother, ensuring more egalitarian treatment of males (ML 481). Thus, Lisbei's own raising of her consciousness, symbolized by the "light," has positive consequences for her society as well as herself.

Vonarburg takes the Pimpernella motif even further than simply a mirror for the Angresea twins' unity; in the framing narrative made explicit in the epilogue, Vonarburg has Kelys reveal that the Pimpernella cycle is not simply a metaphor, but rather a physical reality. Kelys, in her report to her people unveils her own androgyny; she has the ability to metamorphose into either sex at will. This ability of self-transformation is associated with the telepathic sensitivity shared by Lisbei and a growing number of the Maerlande population; it is also linked to survival from the Malady, which ensures remarkable regenerative

capabilities and longevity, a fact close to Lisbei's speculations in her journal.

In the report, Kelys speaks to others who share these characteristics, and who have isolated themselves from Maerlande and the world beyond the Badlands. Kelys's discussion of the Christ-like saviour, Garde, as another renegade from this mysterious society explains the mystery of Garde's miraculous resurrection and her promise that "one day. . . all human beings would be like Garde : no longer would they fear death. . ."(ML 139). Kelys attempts to justify her own secret manipulation of Maerlande's evolution through her own personal genetic experiments, as a valid and necessary continuation of Garde's work, work that those in the Badlands have neglected. It is revealed that Kelys, in hearing Selva's story of her fears about her sexual duties as Mother, stepped in and secretly took Erne of Callenbasch's place as the Mother's male; thus Kelys, having been moved by Selva's story, changes the "tapestry" of her own experiments by fathering Lisbei (ML 484). However, it is not simply through contributing genetic material that Kelys affects Maerlande society; the tales she tells also move to change the world, for Lisbei and many others are inspired by Kelys's stories to explore physical and mental frontiers (ML 465). Kelys also hopes to move her audience of peers through her reconstruction of events, a reconstruction like Offred's that acknowledges missing pieces, and multiple voices (ML 482). Thus, in Vonarburg's view, storytelling can inspire a personal world-view where gender

expectations are unimportant, which results in movement toward a generally more healthy, creative and spiritually whole society.

Like Atwood and Vonarburg, Gibson uses the story-telling motif in *Neuromancer* for the same subversive purposes seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *In the Mother's Land*. Although there is not the same first person, and therefore unreliable, narration that is present in the other two novels, Gibson still manages to give the readers multiple first-person accounts that oppose the rigid view encouraged by the patriarchal plutocracy. Throughout the novel, there are episodes where characters break through the emotional isolation encouraged by their society. Usually the stories are undocumented in the "system" because the information is threatening to the corporation leaders, and thus dangerous to tell; even in a world where the information superhighway is running full speed, certain subversive stories are kept alive only by word of mouth. For example, the Finn shares his story about Tessier-Ashpool S.A. and the stolen bust-computer terminal, more out of a love of sharing stories than the high price he charges for information; this tale is a vital clue to Case's mission, and to the dangers he and Molly might confront, namely "a vatgrown ninja assassin" (N 74). Similarly, in the Finn's protected pocket of isolation, Molly can safely tell Case about Armitage and thus subvert the societal mandate of emotional isolation to make an alliance with Case (N 49-51). Perhaps the most subversive tales are the ones told to Lady 3Jane by the artificial intelligences about how Marie France was murdered by

Ashpool; thanks to the help of these "ghosts" and "voices" Jane is inspired to plot Ashpool's demise, and allow Marie France's plan for the artificial intelligences come to fruition (N 229). Jane's actions, like those of Case, Molly, and the Finn, are a rejection of the rules and gender roles made by older, male corporate leaders to keep themselves wealthy and powerful. As in Atwood's and Vonarburg's novel, story-telling, particularly oral tales, offer a connection to alternatives to the rigid gender prescriptions made by society.

Gibson, like the other two novelists, also uses the story-telling motif to draw attention to his own narrative strategies in telling the story. As the individual characters tell their stories in unique voices, the facade of the impartial third person narrative, which in form resembles the sweeping frame that Atwood's historian tries to create, is shown to be inadequate. The readers are made to see that despite the seemingly unbiased narrative, they only experience the story through Case's perspective. Case needs to hear others' stories to learn more about his mission. Like Lisbei, Kelys, and Offred, Case acknowledges that he only knows part of the story when, even at the end of the novel, he asks questions (N 270). It is clear that Case can only reconstruct incomplete, and sometimes contradictory, visions of events.

Gibson emphasizes the reconstruction process by which fiction, as well as gender roles, are formed, by blending a number of literary genres with media of popular culture. Gibson

himself says:

This process of cultural mongrelization seems to be what postmodernism is all about. The result is a generation of people (some of whom are artists) whose tastes are wildly eclectic. . . I don't have a sense of writing as being divided up into different *compartments*, and I don't separate literature from the other arts. Fiction, television, music, film--all provide material in the form of images and phrases and codes that creep into my writing in ways both deliberate and unconscious.⁷⁸

In making a collage of genres, such as mixing together the traditional "hardboiled detective" novel and science fiction, as well as alluding to other forms of communication, particularly the multimedia landscape of cyberspace, Gibson blurs artistic boundaries,⁷⁹ much as Vonarburg and Atwood do in their treatments of written history and oral tradition. As discussed in Chapter Four, above, the blurring of physical boundaries is a primary metaphor for the creation of a variety of gender configurations in each of the three novels. Thus, as with Atwood and Vonarburg, the readers see Gibson reflecting his purpose in his storytelling technique.

Akin to the stylistic blurring of genres, is the blurring of the boundaries between human and manufactured product which is epitomized in the "cyborg" image used, to varying extents, by all three authors. Donna Haraway's definitive essay on the meaning of the cyborg's emergence in twentieth century society for

⁷⁸William Gibson, "An Interview With William Gibson," by Larry McCaffery, *Reality Studio*, 266.

⁷⁹Scott Buckatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 9; Veronica Hollinger, "Cybernetic Deconstructions," 31.

feminism and postmodernism helps to illustrate how Gibson, Atwood, and Vonarburg attempt to subvert gender roles by utilizing this image:

The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of "Western" science and politics--the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other--the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. This essay is an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction. It is also an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a post-modernist, not-naturalistic mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end. The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history.⁸⁰

Haraway sees the cyborg as an "illegitimate offspring of militarism, patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism," but, she remarks, "illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential."⁸¹ Thus, cyborgs appropriate the technology of oppression to transform themselves, to make themselves self-regenerative, and thus, independent of the society that marginalizes them; gender dualities no longer exist, for in the cyborg reality there are endless possibilities for sexual configurations. Dr. David Tomas questions whether the

⁸⁰ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Women*, (London: Free Association, 1991) 151.

⁸¹ Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 151.

cyborg can live up to Haraway's subversive hopes, considering that the cyborg does have its origins in patriarchal industrialism; despite possibilities for subversion of the system, the fact, for Tomas, remains that the cyborg is still working in a male-dominated system that opposes feminism.⁸²

Therefore, in *Neuromancer* Haraway's cyborg is seen in multiple forms; never taking exactly the same form, Gibson's cyborgs range from "decanted" humans to "techno-fetishists" and cybernetic constructs. To be more specific, Case's cranial jack, his gateway into cyberspace, is much more subtle than Molly's "mirrorshades" and razor nails. Both characters are self-transforming cyborgs who construct themselves in ways that subvert the order of Sprawl plutocracy and "natural" gender roles. Case's interfaces within cyberspace and "simstim" allow him to breach the gender restrictions imposed on him by the label console cowboy: at will, he becomes merged with Molly on two missions, experiencing every sensation she feels, which blurs the distinction between the male console cowboy and the female street samurai (N 64-67; 175-230); he is able to move beyond the emotional isolation encouraged as male power in his relationships with the cybernetic constructs of Linda Lee and McCoy Pauley the Dixie Flatline, themselves variations of the cyborg image. Molly, too, moves beyond the gender role prescribed for women. Her male-dominated, capitalistic society sanctions her decision

⁸²Dr. David Tomas, "The Body and Technology," and "Cybernetics and Feedback: Reimagining the Body in the Age of the Cyborg," Humanities Research Group of the University of Windsor, 1993-1994 Distinguished Speaker Series on Technology and Culture, Windsor, November 4, 1993.

to become a high-tech prostitute, a "meat puppet," whose cybernetic implant allows her to become any client's sexual fantasy (N 147); however, Molly uses the money she earns to mechanically augment her body, in order to become armoured, inscrutable and dangerous (N 148). She changes from an automatized geisha into the "mirror-shaded" street samaurai; Molly thus subverts society's intended gender role for her, by making her cyborg enhancements a chance for empowerment. They are seeming contradictions, meat puppet and warrior, loner and lover, male and female, but in Gibson's world, these paradoxes are the essence of cyborg configurations and gender subversions. Through his act of telling, Gibson challenges conventional gender roles in his use of the cyborg image.

Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, deals in cyborg contradictions and reconstructions, too. She uses her tape recorder, a machine that is part of the patriarchal industrialism Haraway names, to create a construct of herself that opposes the strict gender roles Gilead imposes. Like the constructs of Linda Lee and the Dixie Flatline, Offred's version of herself is separated from her physical body, but paradoxically is a more accurate representation of herself than the construction of the Handmaid by Gilead that has physical form. Atwood's narrator speaks the cyborg language of irony:

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.

These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose

myself. (HMT 104)

Offred understands that "irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true."⁸³ Thus Offred constructs contrasting but true versions of herself: obedient Handmaid; secret renegade; faithful spouse; Nick's lover; powerless woman; and empowered story-teller. As a cyborg, in her interface with technology, and her use of language as a method for paradoxical self-construction, Offred opposes the patriarchy and the hegemonic language that attempt to define her according to a vision of dualistic gender roles.

Like the cyborgs in *Neuromancer* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Vonarburg's characters are also cyborgs. It is suggested that the characters of *In the Mother's Land* are descendents of characters in her previous novel *The Silent City*, where Paul, a scientist, uses technology to create Eliza, a super-human entity with remarkable regenerative capabilities.⁸⁴ Eliza, like Kelys, has the power to change genders at will, and eventually rebels against Paul's domination to find her own way in the world. Kelys, inheriting Eliza's mutability, and Paul's ambition to manipulate genetics, finds that her fellow cyborgs rarely follow the path she intends for them. Mutations happen when "for once I hadn't planned it" (ML 485). Sylvane, the promising offspring of

⁸³Haraway, 164.

⁸⁴Wolmark, 136.

Guiseia and Toller, unexpectedly dies from the Malady instead of developing the powers of Kelys's people (ML 402), while Lisbei learns "to activate some of her capacities all by herself. . . without much outside help" (ML 487). Kelys learns what she should have known from her own existence, that cyborgs are unpredictable, and can mutate themselves in a countless number of forms. As Wolmark suggests about Eliza's cyborg identity, Lisbei and the other cyborgs in *In the Mother's Land* represent a "potential for change"⁸⁵ and growth that results from the instability of gender roles.

Lisbei herself, like Offred, Case, and Molly, claims a number of identities, such as "Lisbei-of-the Decision," "Lisbei-of-the-Independentas," "Lisbei-of-Belmont," "Lisbei-of-the-Blues" (ML 339), Selva's child, Yemen's mother, avid journal writer. Just as Molly in *Neuromancer* constructs herself by adding new technology to her body, Lisbei the author often uses writing to construct herself, thus validating Haraway's comment that "writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs."⁸⁶ Like Offred in Atwood's novel, Lisbei uses her journal to proceed on an interior journey of self-discovery; however, the open-endedness of both novels demonstrates that this journey is an ongoing process which can never be concluded, since both Offred and Lisbei grow and change through time. Hutcheon describes the paradoxical tension between "dynamic process (reading, writing)"

⁸⁵Wolmark, 137.

⁸⁶Haraway, 176.

and the way it is "unavoidably articulated in the form of a static product (the thing read and written). Accordingly, the totality of character can never be captured by the written word, and therefore never fully known, although certain, fragmented aspects of it can be explored.⁸⁷ Thus, both characters cannot be pinned down in the static form of the written word, as the continuing mystery of Offred's true identity (HT 286) and the blackened lines of Lisbei's notebook illustrate (482). As Atwood does with Offred, Vonarburg shows how Lisbei, in true cyborg fashion, is self-constructed by her subversive use of technology, such as her experience with the drug agvite in the Celebration (278), and her journal writing; she becomes a complex, and often paradoxical character, who is far more vast than the simple labels generated by Maerlande gender roles.

According to Haraway's criteria for "cyborg writing," Atwood, Vonarburg, and Gibson are cyborg authors. Haraway states:

Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.

The tools are often stories, re-told stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In re-telling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture.⁸⁸

Thus we see these authors re-configuring mythic patterns, such as the exclusively male heroic pattern identified by Joseph Campbell

⁸⁷ Hutcheon, 138.

⁸⁸ Haraway, 176.

in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. There, Campbell states:

Woman in the picture language of mythology represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures him, guides him, she bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, knower and the known, will be released from every limitation. Woman⁸⁹ is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous pleasure.

Yet the writings of Atwood, Gibson, and Vonarburg subvert this pattern to show that with multiple gender roles, the hero has more than a thousand faces.

Marlene Barr borrows a term from Pearson and Pope that names a new mythic pattern called the "female hero" to describe patterns in feminist speculative fiction.⁹⁰ Similar to Campbell's postulation, Barr sees the protagonists of such speculative fiction as progressing through various growth experiences, in order to transform the self and society; however, Barr shows that characters who are female can be heroes in search of growth, and not merely a measurement of a male hero's evolution. Moreover, characteristics that patriarchal society has labelled "feminine" contribute to the female hero's heroism, enabling her, rather than another sort of hero, to successfully complete her quest. Barr states that female heroes "combine loving, nurturing, and comforting with restlessness,

⁸⁹ Joseph Campbell. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949) 116.

⁹⁰ Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope. *The Female Hero in American and British Literature* (New York: Bowker, 1981) 4.

anger and fierceness. They are not debased by feminine characteristics."⁹¹ Rather, there is the acknowledgement by the authors, through the reversal of expected gender roles, that concepts such as heroism are not contingent on gender.

Gibson reverses the male heroic archetype by presenting Molly as the physically active adventurer, while Case is her (necessary) assistant through cyberspace (N 60). Molly confronts the physical danger, rescuing Case from assassins when Linda Lee is killed (N 38-39). Yet Molly nurtures Case when she helps him to recover from surgery to restore his neural network (N 31-32), and her strength and independence do not inhibit her from also being a lover to Case (N 33). Clearly, in Gibson's cyborg retelling of "hard-boiled detective" fiction, a male gender is not a requisite for heroism.

Like Gibson, Atwood also plays with definitions of heroism. In contrast to the passive female roles created by Gilead, Moira takes action and escapes from the Red Centre (HT 125). Moira is not a marker for challenges overcome by a male hero; instead, she is the one who takes up challenges. She is not a helpless creature who needs to be rescued, for she "had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman"(HT 125). Atwood demonstrates, in this play on the idea that an independent woman must be sexually loose, that this type of autonomous heroism does not solely belong in the male domain. Moreover, Atwood contrasts this with a different type of heroism

⁹¹Barr, 71.

illustrated by Offred. Throughout her stay at the Commander's House, she grows and becomes more able to take risks in the name of love. The patriarchal Gilead would replace love with duty (HT 206); however, Offred recognizes that the ability to love is what makes her, and others, completely human. In glorifying the violence wreaked by the warrior Angels as heroism, the Gilead patriarchy denies that the capacity to love, which they have labelled as feminine, is an important heroic trait.

Although Atwood and Gibson deal with revisions of heroic definitions in their stories, it is Vonarburg who deals with this issue most extensively, more directly addressing the possibilities of mythological subversions. In many ways, Lisbei fits Campbell's archetypal pattern, for she wears many of the thousand faces of the male hero: the readers see her grow from a child, to become a "warrior" or Patrolla in the Badlands; Lisbei also plays the "lover" to Tula, Toller, and Guiseia; she is placed in the role of "Emperor" or "Tyrant"⁹² when she is Selva's heir-apparent to the leadership of Bethely; Lisbei is portrayed as "world redeemer" in her messages against the rigid and destructive gender codes. However, Vonarburg subverts Campbell's pattern by introducing both male and female temptresses for Lisbei as hero. She also reconfigures the hero's important encounters with "the father," who is "the initiating priest through whom the young being passes into the larger world,"⁹³ by

⁹² Campbell, 245-349.

⁹³ Campbell, 116.

having Kelys play that role in her female form; Kelys teaches Lisbei the taiche, and helps to train her in her work as "recuperata" and "explora." Finally, Vonarburg merges contradictory roles, according to Campbell's heroic pattern; Lisbei seems to fit the heroic role of "saint" when she retreats from the world upon acknowledging the social transgression of becoming pregnant by a socially unsanctioned sexual relationship; however she also embraces the role of mother, which for Campbell is "other" for the male hero.⁹⁴

Vonarburg also reconfigures other mythic patterns in the mythology of Maerlande that Lisbei studies. The tale of Garde is obviously a revision of the Christian myth of Jesus. Garde is called the "Daughter" of the creator "Elli." Vonarburg, in the name "Elli," creates a concept of the creator as having both male and female aspects, combining the French feminine personal pronoun "elle" with the male personal pronoun "il." Not only does the name "Elli" play upon the Hebrew names for God, "Elohim" and "El Shaddai," found in the Old Testament, but it also emphasizes the androgyny, linked with Spiritual growth, advocated by Garde. Garde's actions parallel Christ's in many ways, such as her messages of goodwill among humans, and her promise that the people of the world will one day be as she is, transcendent over death and the physical marks of gender. Garde, like Christ, has a following of disciples, is unjustly ordered executed by a tyrannical government, and makes a miraculous resurrection that

⁹⁴Campbell, 302.

influences world religion. However, in Vonarburg's version, the saviour's promise is not of heaven and the afterlife, but a gender eutopia in the material world; Garde's childhood diary, contained in the notebook discovered by Lisbei, reveals that she wants people to stop hurting each other, in the Harem period where men persecute women (ML 425). Constructed gender roles are the cause of the pain and mistreatment; Garde's promise of evolution reveals that such constructions are irrelevant. As Christ preached the importance of seeing the spiritual world beyond the material world, Vonarburg's Garde preaches the importance of seeing people beyond gender. Stories of Garde influence Maerlande society as Vonarburg hopes that her story will influence her readers.

Clearly, storytelling is a subversive activity within the fictional worlds of Vonarburg, Atwood, and Gibson, and by extension, within our own world. The authors attempt to expand their readers' notions about possibilities for gender roles. In re-working mythic patterns, and displacing conventional gender roles through their characters' own oppositional storytelling, and working with the new, powerful, non-gendered image of the cyborg, Vonarburg, Atwood, and Gibson offer their readers alternatives to strict societal codes that dictate roles based on gender. Ultimately, they call for a society where the acceptance of a multiplicity of gender roles brings the world a small step closer to achieving Utopia.

Conclusion

The Utopian novel has, since De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*, been one of the prime science fiction genres used by Canadian writers. It has also been utilized by authors such as Wittig, Le Guin, and Charnas, to advance feminist philosophies. In studying Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and Vonarburg's *In The Mother's Land*, it becomes apparent that all three authors have joined these two converging traditions, depicting fictional futures in which, implicitly or explicitly, varied gender roles are advocated.

Recognizable in each of the novels are satiric mirrors that emphasize and illuminate some of the problems within contemporary Canadian society regarding limited gender roles. Atwood, with her dystopian portrayal of Gilead, warns against a resurgence of the patriarchal mandates based on gender that have plagued Western society in the past, where women's power was arbitrarily marginalized, and their voices in history and literature silenced. Atwood also cautions her readers, with the "Historical Notes" epilogue, not to become complacent with the recent progress that has been made in accepting a larger variety of gender configurations, for contemporary society is far from perfect in its tolerance of multiple gender roles, and thus, although it has improved, it is not yet a gender eutopia.

Vonarburg responds to Atwood's and other writers of feminist utopian fictions, as well as to societal gender limitations

addressed by those authors. In *The Mother's Land* not only demonstrates the problems that traditional patriarchal systems have created for our society, but also indicates difficulties that feminist isolationist solutions, advocated by Wittig and others, present. Vonarburg shows how an inversion of patriarchal social structures, that maintain a binary view of gender, simply reverses the problems and continues to unjustly marginalize and define individuals on the basis of gender.

Gibson also illustrates the problems of limited gender definitions in *Neuromancer*. In this future dystopia, values that have been traditionally associated with the masculine in Western society, such as emotional independence, aggressive competition, and violence, are adopted and internalized by all, although gender often determines how these values are enacted. Every relationship and situation is turned into a competitive power struggle, the goal of which is to win and obtain material wealth; virtues associated with the feminine in contemporary society and presented in novels depicting immortal feminist communities, such as intimacy and cooperation, are devalued. In this portrayal of the future, Gibson sheds light on the values of contemporary society, especially in the corporate world, where this trend already exists; arbitrarily defined as feminine, certain humanistic and important values are dismissed for the sake of competition and economic power.

Ultimately, all three authors use landscape as an image to reflect the limitations of strict gender roles, and alternatives.

"The Centre" becomes the metaphor for a gender prison; whether it is as small as Case's Chiba coffin or the Commander's house, or as large as the cities of Bethely, Gilead, or the Sprawl, the Centre is a place of confinement, and its tyrannical rules about gender unjustly inhibit the pursuit of self-actualization. However, Gibson, Atwood, and Vonarburg offer other landscapes that oppose the Centre. Sharing the Centre's enclosing nature, pockets of isolation provide relief from the Centre's gender mandates, and the privacy to think about or enact alternative, and more authentic gender roles. The pockets of isolation are places of protection, such as the Safe House where Offred records her journal, or Lisbei's excavation site in Bethely, where resistance to the Centre's strict codes can exist. These protected pockets of isolation also provide a sense of promise for what can exist beyond the borders of the Centre; Cyberspace, The Badlands, and Atwood's future Canada are all marginal spaces in which individuals can act according to their own self-definitions, and not imposed definitions based on gender.

In depicting metaphorical marginal spaces where varied gender roles can exist, Atwood, Gibson, and Vonarburg offer suggestions for the subversion of binary gender roles. They show the readers, by example, how storytelling is a powerful tool in generating new concepts for gender configurations. All three authors give the readers alternatives to traditional western gender roles, by illustrating revisions of official texts through oral communication, or feminist re-working of traditionally

patriarchal mythic patterns, such as the "hero." The authors also use the cyborg image as a metaphor for self-structured identity, that can include countless variations of gender roles. In utilizing subversive storytelling techniques, Atwood, Gibson, and Vonarburg give their readers new perspectives on the multiplicity of gender roles that are possible.

Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Neuromancer*, and *In The Mother's Land*, Atwood, Gibson, and Vonarburg clarify the problems that exist in contemporary society regarding binary concepts of gender. They demonstrate how such rigid thinking about gender can lead a society to dystopia. However, they do not leave the readers without hope. All three authors, in the hope of inspiring readers to expand their notions and repertoire of possible gender constructions, present potential eutopian ideals that can be incorporated into contemporary society. Hence, by depicting future worlds in fiction, Vonarburg, Gibson, and Atwood, hope to change the present world for the better, bringing themselves and their readers closer to a place where societal roles are not based on gender but on individual choice, where individual differences are appreciated and encouraged, and where a Eutopia free of gender regimentation can materialize.

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